DEADLY DISGUISE

A NEW ELM STREET NOVEL

FREDDY KRUEGER'S™ TALES OF TERROR

BASED ON THE CHARACTERS CREATED BY WES CRAVEN

PERMA-BOUND

DAVID BERGANTINO

Annotation

A PARTY TO DIE FOR!

It's Halloween in Springwood and the place to be is the old Appleby mansion where the lord of the manor is none other than Jack Spyder, himself.

Born John Appleby, Jack Spyder changed his name when he was eight, right after he was discovered in a national talent search and landed a role on a hit television sitcom. But like many child stars, Jack rose to fame too fast, and when he lost his parents suddenly in a terrible accident, he returned home to the mansion that they owned in Springwood.

Then teen idol Jack throws a Halloween bash — the party to end all parties. Not only has the local boy-made-good returned home, but it has also been rumored that the accident which Jack himself had been in had ruined his clean-cut good looks. Will he be as hideous as the gossip papers have suggested? Will the party be beyond Springwood's wildest expectations? Everyone is literally dying to find out.

- David Bergantino
  -
  - Prologue
  - Chapter 1
  - Chapter 2
  - Chapter 3
  - Chapter 4
  - Chapter 5
  - Chapter 6
  - Chapter 7
  - Chapter 8
  - Chapter 9
  - Chapter 10
  - Chapter 11
  - Chapter 12
  - Epilogue
  -

David Bergantino
Freddy Krueger's Tales of Terror #6: Deadly Disguise

For Brent and Andy

OCR Mysuli: denlib@tut.by

Prologue

Do I hear someone tapping? As if someone gently rapping, rapping at my boiler-room door? Why it's all my boys and ghouls, all dressed in Halloween costumes. Ah, Halloween… my favorite time of year and overall, a great day to be dead.

Let's see what you've all come as this year. I see a witch… hideous. There's a vampire… horrific. A zombie… terrifying. And what are you supposed to be? What's that? Snuggles the fabric-softener bear?

Now I'm really *scared!*

If you think about it, Halloween isn't really all that much different from every other day of the year. We don our masks, hide our real selves, and pretend to be someone else. Everyone does it. Makes you stop and think, doesn't it? Makes you wonder about those around you.

Who's to say your best friend isn't really your enemy in disguise, a wolf in sheep's clothing. Maybe your best friend was *your best friend. Once. Only now, your friend's become a predator.*

And maybe, just maybe, you're the prey.

So the truth is, Halloween — with its ghouls, ghosts, and goblins — is the only time when people reveal themselves to be the monsters they truly are.

What do you reveal about yourself I wonder?

The following tale of terror has plenty of revelations — few of them very pleasant. I drop it in your bag as my Halloween treat to you. It may scare you to death, but at least it won't cause tooth decay!

Heh heh heh…

Chapter 1

Rachel Chan was surrounded.

To her left stood a werewolf and a ghost. To her right, a male and female vampire toasted each other with goblets filled with dark, red liquid. Nearby, a putrescent zombie stared hungrily at a voodoo priestess wearing a necklace of shrunken heads.

"What are they supposed to be?" Rachel asked Clyde Barrow, the notorious gangster. He and his femme fatale Bonnie Parker turned toward a gang of bipedal, greenish blobs weaving their way through the ghoulish assembly.

After a quick study, Clyde said, "Actually, I think they're supposed to be phlegm."

"Eww!" said both Rachel and Bonnie, who was really Laura Walcutt in a Halloween costume. «Clyde» was Laura's boyfriend, Doug Stately.

At that moment, the zombie asked the voodoo priestess if she wanted to take a walk in the woods. He clearly was fishing for more than just a walk. But he didn't even get a nibble as the priestess gave him a look that said, "Get a life!" and walked briskly away.

"What are you supposed to be?" asked Doug.

Rachel turned in place, modeling her sleek, black bodysuit. On it were attached various candies; popcorn spilled from a container affixed just below her right shoulder. Across her stomach, a soda cup appeared to be spilling its contents. Rachel's head was adorned with a large-sized popcorn container, its rim cut to points. Jujyfruits were glued to it like precious jewels on a crown. With a greatly affected air of royalty, Rachel touched the head of each of her friends with a scepter made of braided red licorice vines topped with a star.

"I am the Queen of Movie-Theater Floors and you are my loyal subjects." Each gangster took their knighting with great solemnity — followed by giggling. Then, with a flick of a switch at the cuff of Rachel's sleeve, a double row of tiny Christmas lights lit up, running down her left side from shoulder to ankle. "Safety lights," Rachel told them with a wink. "In the unlikely event of an emergency." This produced a gale of laughter from her friends.

"Where did you come up with that one?" Doug chuckled after taking a sip of his punch — which looked remarkably like blood.

"I don't know exactly," Rachel admitted. "I was trying to think of something original, and non-horrific, and at some point my mind produced this."

"I know what you mean by trying to think of something not gross or scary," Laura agreed. Then she looked around her at the monsters on every side. "I mean, I know tonight's supposed to be the Night of the Dead and everything…" Laura's voice trailed off mysteriously. Rachel knew that her friend's mind was traveling off somewhere else… somewhere entirely unpleasant.

Doug saw it, too, and quickly put an arm around Laura's shoulders. He looked deep into her eyes, as if to connect with her thoughts, and drew her back.

"Sorry," Laura said, embarrassed. "Spaced out." Then she took a good look at Rachel's costume. "You know, a movie-theater floor is pretty scary," she declared.

Rachel laughed. "Bonnie and Clyde aren't exactly Raggedy Ann and Andy."

"I know," sighed Laura. "I wanted to go as a pair, but…"

"But," Doug interrupted playfully, "I refused to do anything cutesy." Laura batted him on the shoulder. "At least I didn't insist on us being Bonnie and Clyde *after* they got shot up," he teased.

"Well, I think you guys look cute," Rachel told them. In response, Doug proudly hugged Laura close to his side. They both smiled. Dressing like gangsters couldn't hide the fact that they really were Raggedy Ann and Andy.

"Isn't this place beautiful?" Laura asked, spinning to take in the majestic surroundings.

"Shelby would absolutely *love* it!" Rachel exclaimed. The words spilled from her mouth so quickly, they created a vacuum which instantly sucked her foot into her mouth. Laura exchanged a pained glance with Doug.

"Oh, you know Shelby," Laura said, nervously trying to laugh off her obvious discomfort. "Not exactly a party animal."

Rachel exhaled slowly, angry with herself. In her excitement, she had forgotten that even an indirect reminder of "The Summer of Blood," as it

was called, was taboo. Rachel been in Japan visiting relatives this past summer and by the time she'd returned, it was a subject no longer spoken of by those involved. All Rachel knew about it was what she had read in the newspapers. Three of her classmates — none of them close friends of hers — had died at the hands of a new arrival to Springwood. Apparently, Laura and her sister Shelby had been at the center of the horrible events, but both flatly refused to talk about what had happened. Since then, Shelby had retreated into her books and collections, rarely socializing.

"I'm sorry," Rachel offered weakly. Laura simply gave her an *"It's-all-right-even-though-it-really-isn't"* shrug. She looked so sad. Rachel didn't know what more she could say, and so, she said nothing. Ultimately, Doug suggested that the three of them go get punch refills.

At the table, a dark, wispy girl named Maria, dressed in a black-and-white caterer's uniform, glumly ladled punch into cups for them.

"You guys are lucky," she told them, her voice barely audible above din of the dance music. "You get to party. I get to watch."

"You don't have to do this all night, do you?" Rachel asked as she took a cup from Maria. The change of subject was more than welcome.

"No," Maria whined hopelessly, handing cups to Laura and Doug. "But we don't get off until midnight, and I want to party now!"

Doug snickered at Maria's penchant for melodrama. It was the reason why watching her in drama class productions was so painfully amusing. "Why are you working, then?"

"I thought it would get me behind the scenes!" She gestured broadly and emphatically, trying hard to evoke deep sympathy, "It's only gotten me behind this stupid table." To conclude her performance, she wrapped her arms around herself and looked wounded.

"You're such a nut!" Doug joked. Maria only glared back at him.

Just then, a bone-thin guy with the nervous manner of a hummingbird butted into the conversation. "Hey y'all! What's the commotion?" He was slick and cheerful. And no one liked him.

"Just getting some punch," Doug said coldly, turning back to Laura.

Again, conversation went comatose while they all waited for RePete — so nicknamed because his given name was Pete Peters — to leave. Like Maria, he was part of the catering brigade. But at the moment, like most moments in RePete's life, he was strenuously avoiding work.

"The punch tastes like Jell-O without the wiggle, if you know what I mean," RePete quipped. Nobody knew what he meant. Nor did they care. Despite the lack of response, RePete forged ahead as if the others were his best buddies. "Isn't this place amazing?" he asked, seemingly awestruck, scanning the vast room around them. This produced a stiff nod of assent from Rachel. RePete mistook this for encouragement. "I'll tell ya. It makes Scarlett O'Hara's house in *Gone with the Wind* look like a grass shack on *Gilligan's Island*!" The line produced a giggle from Maria, and a smile broke out on Rachel's face. Doug just raised a tired eyebrow. "Am I lying? I am *not* lying!" RePete declared.

"Cute," Doug said without much enthusiasm. He then turned to Rachel. "We're gonna go dance. If you want, come join us." They told Maria they'd see her later, then, giving RePete the faintest nod of acknowledgement, Doug and Laura left to dance.

Rachel watched them with a sigh. What a lucky couple, she thought. Her eyes scanned the rest of the ballroom. The DJ booth was against the wall directly opposite the catering table. Between them was an ocean of costumed bodies. At the back of the ballroom, two elegant staircases led upward in a gently curving V. Rachel sighed again. RePete might be irritating, but his description of their sumptuous environment was completely on target.

"Bet you're thinking of Jack," Maria intruded suddenly.

Rachel shrugged. "Not really."

RePete leaned closer toward her. "You'd fail a lie detector test. How could you not be thinking of him? You're standing in his house." Maria joined the huddle. "Think it's true?" RePete asked breathlessly. "Think he's really turned into…" he paused dramatically"…a monster?"

"I hope not," Maria said, her eyes filled with a warped excitement. "That would be so sad." She turned to Rachel. "You know him better than anybody. Is it true?"

"I haven't talked to him in a few years," Rachel said. "I honestly have no idea."

Suddenly, the music stopped. The hall filled with a booming voice. It was electronically altered, giving it an eerie, unearthly sound.

"Ladies and gentlemen," came the announcement. "Please gather at the base of the stairs." The voice was eerie, frightening.

A puzzled murmur rose from the crowd. All heads turned and faced the staircase.

"Go ahead," RePete urged Rachel. "We can't leave our station."

"It's probably nothing," Rachel said softly. Then she began to gently push her way through the crowd. The lights in the ballroom dimmed as two spotlights focused on the landing of the right staircase.

"Welcome, my guests," intoned the voice. "I welcome you to the house I grew up in. I welcome you to my home."

A thrill shot through Rachel. Then it was Jack!

A figure, dressed as the Phantom of the Opera, appeared suddenly in the glare of the spotlights. His arms spread wide in a grand gesture, the cape billowing dramatically around him. The figure began to descend.

So arresting was the Phantom, and so great the anticipation of seeing Jack Spyder, the room fell silent. Rachel felt queasy. She'd thought she'd be thrilled to see him again. Now she wasn't so sure.

Stopping halfway down the stairs, the figure gestured toward the audience once more.

"It's rude of me to speak from behind this disguise so…"

The Phantom's voice trailed off as one hand reached up and grasped the mask that obscured his face. He paused. Rachel's heart leapt to her throat.

Suddenly, with one smooth gesture, the person claiming to be Jack Spyder tore the mask from his face.

Beneath it glistened bright blue eyes — twin sapphires gleaming through a mass of bright, pink scar tissue.

*** * ***

The creature on the stairs gazed out over the astonished crowd. The rumors had been true. No one knew how to react.

A nervous whispering rose up from the crowd. Some were questioning their own safety.

The irregular slash in the scar tissue where a mouth should be curled into a smile. To some, it looked like a snarl.

"So you think you know me, do you?" the electronic voice demanded. No one dared answer. "How many of you have — or had — posters of me

on your walls?" Heads turned, no longer able to stare at the grotesque figure on the stairs. At their discomfort, he laughed, a dead, electronic sound. "How many of you would like a poster of me now? Free. Signed, even." His only answer was the shuffling of feet. The Phantom began laughing again, a deep, taunting sound. Then the change came, so slowly, it was almost imperceptible. The voice began to warm. The guests looked up in surprise at the figure, who was laughing now. The sound was human. Normal. The laughter soon became as infectious as it had been frightening just moments before. Rachel heard nervous snickering all around her. She wanted to laugh too, but she feared she didn't get the joke.

"Oh you guys," said the Phantom in a clear voice Rachel instantly recognized as Jack's. The creature somehow didn't look so fearsome anymore.

"Gotcha!" yelled the Phantom cheerfully. Then he reached up to his face near his temple and pulled. The scar tissue — a realistic rubber mask — peeled away quickly. The unscathed face of Jack Spyder beamed out at them. "Happy Halloween!" he cried as he descended the steps.

The music resumed and the happy chaos of the party began again. Their host wasn't a monster after all. Rachel heard a few people mutter that Jack was a jerk.

For her part, Rachel was too exhausted to be thrilled or angry at Jack. Her emotions in the space of ten seconds had run the gamut. If anything, she was left with the lingering fear that if he still looked like Jack Spyder, he might still act like the stranger he had become.

Jack stood at the base of the stairs. He was speaking to a partygoer dressed as a split-Elvis, his right side the young, good-looking Elvis, on the left side his body the older Elvis of Vegas. Jack and Elvis seemed to be talking very seriously about something, then suddenly Elvis turned and pointed directly at Rachel.

Embarrassed, Rachel looked around, thinking Elvis might be pointing behind her or beside her. But when she turned back, Jack was looking right at her. And smiling. After a final, brief word to Elvis, Jack began to wade through the crowd toward her. Dancing werewolves and superheroes patted him on the back and shouted greetings as he passed. He gave brief replies, not allowing himself to be drawn into conversation.

Moments later, he was standing before Rachel, silent, staring. Rachel found herself doing the same thing, trying to match his appearance with her

memory. And before she knew it, Jack had swept her up into an embrace. Her fears surfaced and she struggled out of his arms. Jack looked stunned then backed off quickly, embarrassed.

Chapter 2

Jack Spyder, born John Appleby, had been a performer from the word go. A ham, most would say, with a vivid imagination. He was always clowning and mugging for cameras. By the time he was seven, he had done several local television commercials and appeared in magazines and department-store catalogs. Not long after that he was discovered by a Hollywood producer casting a new prime-time television series.

It had been a lark, really. The Applebys were no stage parents and they didn't exactly need their son's entertainment income. The Applebys, in fact, had originally owned most of the land on which Springwood had been built. Hence, their palatial estate. But they were down-home people despite it all, and when their only child John was offered a role in the new sitcom, they allowed him to accept for one reason: show business sounded like a lot of fun. So gung ho were they, that the family moved, retaining their local holdings, straight out to Los Angeles a month later.

The show was called *Nutt House*, and John was cast as Johnny Nutt, middle son in the Nutt family. The producer was convinced that Johnny was going to be big. But, he complained, John Appleby was no name for a destiny-chaser. After much debate, the cute young Midwestern boy was transformed into Jack Spyder, teen idol in training.

It wasn't long before Jack Spyder had melted the hearts of all the prepubescent girls in the country — and won their parents over as well. *Nutt House* vaulted to the top of the ratings charts almost overnight. And while the actor portraying the Nutt clan patriarch (a fading, former Box Office Draw) was the nominal star of the series, it was Jack Spyder who captured the imaginations of his audience.

During his first few years away, John called and visited frequently. When the show was on hiatus — show business lingo for "summer vacation" — John came back to Springwood to see his friends.

He always made special time for his former girlfriend — as much as a girl could be a friend at age seven — Rachel.

As *Nutt House* entered its fourth, juggernaut year, however, and Jack Spyder's face regularly adorned the teen magazines, his calls to Springwood became less frequent. The visits slowed as well. One time John had paid

Rachel's airfare out to Los Angeles so she could see the show from behind the scenes. But during the visit, John made little time for her, and seemed far more interested in showing off than in sharing his "great adventure." Rachel told him off just before his driver took her back to the airport a day early. She had heard from him only twice since then.

Shortly after Rachel fled Los Angeles, *Nutt House* was canceled. The show had been on for eight years and just wore itself out. Jack seemed to be the only one from the cast with any hope for the future. His star had eclipsed that of the program long ago. He was now sixteen and convinced he was still in ascension.

It was then that the rubber band of fame and fortune, stretched thin and taut, snapped back, propelling Jack into disaster. His feature-film debut was a critical and commercial flop. Several stalking incidents involving a crazed female fan were widely reported.

But it didn't end there.

A year after *Nutt House* was canceled, Jack's parents were killed in an automobile accident. It was simply one of those freakish, fatal incidents dispassionately reported on radio traffic reports:

"Fatal, two-car collision on the 405. Slow going through the Wilshire corridor. Use side streets to avoid the snarl caused by rubberneckers at the scene."

And then the tabloids rubbernecked as Jack Spyder experienced an emotional collapse. He dropped out of sight.

Six months later, Jack emerged, «miraculously» recovered. But film and television deals never materialized. When push came to shove, the studios felt uneasy investing in a star they felt might become a liability. Newer, younger, fresher — simply *other* — teen actors were around to fill his shoes anyway.

So Jack was shoved out once more.

Then came the fire. It leveled his modest (by Beverly Hills standards) estate. Jack had nearly perished in the blaze, or so went the story. According to the rumor mill, he no longer possessed his teen heartthrob looks. They said he had been burned beyond all recognition.

They said he had become a monster.

Months went by. Jack dropped from sight so completely and effectively that finally even the tabloids moved on to more current targets.

Only Rachel never stopped thinking of her childhood friend.

Then came news that Appleby Mansion was being reopened. Rumors surfaced that Jack Spyder was returning to his hometown. Ron Marchant, a former teen actor himself, now Jack's manager, had the house refurbished over the summer. According to Doug, who had worked on the mansion over the summer, Marchant was remaining silent on the whole matter. He did, however, produce a power-of-attorney letter, proving himself to be authorized to handle Jack's affairs.

So work went on and on, well into the fall. Heavy machinery was unloaded into the mansion, its purpose a mystery. Even more mysterious were the invitations that showed up in the mailboxes of all local teenagers. They simply read:

> Halloween Party
> October 31 beginning at 8:00 pm
> Appleby Mansion
> Your Host: Jack Spyder

Handwritten on Rachel's invitation were the words, "Rachel — Please come."

* * *

Now Rachel was here at the mansion. She had the answer to one question: Jack Spyder was no monster. But the other question remained: Was there anything left of John Appleby, the boy she had once loved?

Chapter 3

"I'm sorry. I haven't even said a proper hello yet." Jack Spyder looked to the floor. And for a moment, he was eight again. John Appleby had returned to her.

But Rachel wouldn't let herself give in that quickly.

"You've been out of touch the last few years," Rachel told him, a little more coldly than she intended.

Jack studied her, obviously not sure what to say next.

"You may not believe me," he began, "but I've missed you."

Rachel could see he was torn up inside. But he had a lot of explaining to do before things would be all right. She gave him a skeptical look and waited for him to go on.

"I know you're mad. I was… I wasn't myself that time in L. A."

"Who were you then?" Rachel asked. "And who are you now?"

The question brought a painful smile to Jack's face.

"Jack Spyder? John Appleby? Heck, I could change my name to Godzilla, but that wouldn't change anything. You know, a rose by any other name?" He cocked his head to one side. "Only, I haven't been smelling so sweet for a long time."

Warily, Rachel began to lower her defenses. "There have been lots of stories…"

Jack rolled his eyes, then shook his head sadly. "Well, can you guess at least one that isn't true?"

"The fire," Rachel ventured.

"Oh, my house burned to the ground, all right." Jack sighed. "Luckily, I wasn't in it at the time."

"And the other…?"

"Losing my parents was hard, y'know?" he said suddenly. "No matter what you think of me, I would have been much worse off if they hadn't been there for me. They always brought me back to earth when I was flying too high. Without them…" His voice trailed off, trembling.

Rachel put a hand on his shoulder. "I never told you how sorry I was about your parents," she said softly. He looked into her eyes and smiled.

"That's because I shut out everything that meant the most to me. But that's not going to happen again." Life seemed to flow back into him. He gestured to the throng surrounding him. "That's what this is all about. I'm back!"

"Who's back?" Rachel asked cautiously. "John Appleby or Jack Spyder?"

At this, Jack laughed. "Weren't you listening? It doesn't matter. Call me John if you want. But *I'm* back." To emphasize his point, he lightly pounded his fists on his chest. He seemed invigorated. "I've moved back to Springwood."

"Are you finished with acting for good?" Rachel asked, seeing he was serious.

Jack shrugged. "Never say never, y'know. But it's not like I'm hurting for money. I might as well make me, and maybe some people around me, happy for once." Rachel allowed Jack to take her hands in his. "And I especially want to make *you* happy, if I haven't permanently blown it."

"An hour ago I would have said you had," Rachel told him flatly. The words obviously stung, but Jack seemed ready to take what he had coming. "But that was an hour ago." She smiled. "I'm glad you're back, be you John or Jack."

Jack grinned, delighted by her rhyme — and his second chance. He lightly kissed her fingertips, then pulled her into another hug. This time, Rachel welcomed his embrace.

"I'm so happy!" he whispered in her ear. "Coming back was the right thing to do."

"I hope you're right," Rachel said, suddenly serious. "You're not the only one who has changed. This whole town is different from when you were eight."

"What are you trying to do, rain on my parade?" Jack teased.

"No, it's just that you seem so completely optimistic," Rachel explained. "I just don't want to see you be disappointed — or worse."

"Oh come on! What could be worse than what I've been going through?"

He seemed to be daring Rachel to answer his question. She considered telling him the mortality rate for teenagers in Springwood. But that was too heavy, even for Halloween. Instead, she decided to give him one concrete

example. She pointed through the crowd. Near the D. J.'s table stood two people, one in green tights, the other sporting a coonskin cap.

"See them?" she asked. Jack nodded. "Daniel Boone there is Todd Winkle and Robin Hood is Van McBride."

"Todd and Van!" Jack exclaimed. "I remember them as pretty wild kids. I'll have to talk to them."

"Actually, you'll want to *frisk* them first. They've become major hoodlums."

Jack shook off her comment. "Well, I'll figure it all out eventually. For tonight, I'm worried about only one thing."

"Which is?"

"Tabloids," he said, his eyes darting left and right furtively. "At least one of them has probably got someone working the party tonight."

"I haven't seen anyone who looks even remotely like a reporter." Rachel looked around at all the costumed guests and realized how ridiculous her comment had sounded.

"They may have paid someone you know to get the scoop on me." He peered deep into her eyes. "For all I know, the mole could be you."

"Not a chance!" Rachel said, laughing. "Anyway, what are you worried about? Don't they say that there's no such thing as bad publicity?"

"Ask Exxon about that one," Jack replied wryly. "It's not so much what the tabloids say that bothers me. It's the invasion of privacy. Especially tonight. This isn't about show business or publicity. I just wanna be a regular teenager throwing a party."

"Throwing a party in a huge mansion owned by a teenager of vast wealth," Rachel pointed out.

"Okay, so maybe I can't ever go back to being a normal teenager," Jack agreed. "But it's Halloween, and I can pretend to be whoever I want!"

Rachel giggled at his fake insolence. "Okay, enough with the serious talk."

Jack took her by the hand and started dragging her toward the staircase. "I have to introduce you to my best friend, Ron Marchant."

"I've heard his name."

"Yeah, he's been taking care of things for me. He's also my manager. It was his idea to come back and rebuild. I couldn't have made it without him. I think you two will be great friends, too. I've told him all about you." They

stopped at the bottom of the stairs and stood before the split-Elvis. "Ron, this is Rachel."

Ron lit up at the mention of Rachel's name.

"It's not just excellent to meet you, Rachel," he said, offering his hand, "it's way excellent."

"Glad to meet you, too," Rachel said, shaking hands. His touch felt clammy. "Jack tells me he depends on you a lot."

Ron shrugged humbly. His eyes seemed lifeless, contradicting the spirit of his voice. Something felt wrong.

"Your costume's wonderful!" Ron told her.

"I'm glad you like it," Rachel said. "I thought people would think it was lame."

"Not at all," Ron assured her.

She glanced at Jack, who was smiling, happy that his two friends were hitting it off so well.

"How do you like Springwood?" Rachel asked, trying to be friendly. She really wanted to like John's friend.

"Oh, I love it," Ron answered with strained enthusiasm. "I'm a small-town boy myself."

Rachel saw her opportunity. "Where from?"

"Wisconsin," Ron answered. "But not as nice a place as this. And no one I grew up with lived in a mansion." He scanned the place with what was supposed to pass as a look of wonder. He was performing, Rachel was certain. But for whose benefit? "I love old houses, and this one is practically ancient." He pointed up at the hurricane lamp fixtures on the ballroom walls. "See those? Original from the time of gas lamps. The house is full of 'em!" A flicker of sincerity sparkled in his eyes. "In fact, the original gas lines are still in place behind the walls."

"Yeah," groaned Jack.

"Get over it," Ron scolded, as if for the umpteenth time.

"What?" Rachel asked when it appeared no explanation was forthcoming. Ron turned to Jack for permission to speak, and Jack nodded solemnly.

"Jack… overreacts sometimes," Ron told her. "Late this summer when the house was being worked on, some idiot opened a valve in the basement. He thought it was for water. Instead, it was the old gas-line valve. This

whole place was flooded with fumes in less than an hour." He spoke as if he were telling a joke.

Rachel gasped. "Did anybody get hurt?" Despite Ron's attitude, the situation sounded serious.

"No, and that's what I keep telling Jack here."

"Several people were overcome by the fumes," corrected Jack. "And you could have been killed."

"But I wasn't!" Ron shot back. "Neither was anyone else. We all got over it. So should you." Ron turned to Rachel, and with a bright smile, spoke as if Jack wasn't there. "You see what I'm dealing with here?"

Jack narrowed his eyes and growled at Ron, who just smiled placidly in return.

Just then, a piercing shriek broke through the wall of music. All heads turned toward the ballroom entrance. There, a girl dressed in a large hoop skirt struggled with two large men. A swift kick in the groin felled one of her attackers.

"Jack! Help…"

Her cry was cut short as the remaining attacker clamped one huge hand over her mouth, wrapped a gargantuan arm around her, and dragged her roughly from the doorway and out of sight.

Chapter 4

"Oh no!" Jack muttered. Then to Ron, he barked, "C'mon!" The two ran toward the ballroom entrance. Rachel followed as quickly as she could.

In the outer entrance, the fallen giant sat on the floor against a wall, his knees drawn to his chest. His breath came in pained gasps.

"You okay, Larry?" Jack asked, kneeling down beside him as Ron kept running.

"Just dandy," he groaned.

Jack frowned and rose. He barely spared Rachel a glance as he sped down the hall.

The enormous man, each arm the diameter of Rachel's waist, began to stretch out his legs. That's when she noticed the word written on his blue T-shirt: security. Seeing that, Rachel ran to join Jack and Ron.

Around the corner, the girl in the hoop dress sat awkwardly in a chair. Her arms and legs were crossed insolently. She seemed to be ignoring Jack, who was speaking to her angrily. Ron stood by, ready to mediate. The second giant — also part of security — stood nearby, waiting for trouble.

"Answer me!" Jack yelled at the girl in the chair.

"What's going on?" Rachel asked, gently touching Jack's shoulder to get his attention. At the sound of her voice, the girl in the chair leapt to her feet. The security giant flinched, but stopped short of tackling the girl when she remained where she stood. The girl gave him a withering look, then turned back to Rachel.

"And *who* are you?" she asked with a wicked smile.

"I'm Rachel," she answered hesitantly, glancing at Jack.

"Vanessa…" Jack warned the girl.

"Oh *yes*, Jack," the girl gushed. *"Please* introduce us." Without giving him the opportunity, she stepped forward and held out her hand. "Oh, *I'll* do it. I'm Vanessa *Chimera*, *happy* to meet you."

Rachel shook hands with Vanessa reluctantly. Obviously, Jack knew who she was and didn't like her. Her manner was so forceful, it threw Rachel off balance. Only Ron seemed unshaken by her.

"You're not supposed to be here, Vanessa." Jack's voice was filled with pent-up rage.

Vanessa laughed it off. Then she fixed him with a steely gaze.

"Well I *am* here, Jack," she purred. "So get me some *punch."* To Rachel she flashed a bright and utterly fake smile. "Let's chat *later,* all *right,* hon?" After flashing a self-satisfied look at Jack and Ron, Vanessa sauntered toward the ballroom. The security behemoth started forward, but Jack held up a hand to stop him.

"Come on, Ron," Jack told him tiredly. Ron's eyes twinkled with further amusement.

"I better get her some punch," Ron said, addressing Rachel. "If I *don't,* she may just *kill* me," he said, mocking the way Vanessa spoke. The remark didn't sit well with Jack, who simply scowled.

"Who is she?" Rachel asked. Ron deferred the answer to Jack.

"Ex from hell," he sighed. "I'll tell you about it later. I promise. Will you excuse me for now, though?"

Rachel didn't see that she had a choice. "Of course."

"Thanks," he said, brightening momentarily. Then his face darkened again. "Let's go grab the tiger by the tail," he said to Ron, and they started off.

As he passed, Ron gave Rachel a sly wink.

Jack found Rachel at the punch table where she was flirting with a geeky, nervous caterer who had served her some punch. The geek looked familiar to Jack, but he couldn't quite place him. At the moment, he had more pressing matters on his mind, like how and why Vanessa Chimera had ended up in Springwood.

As he and Ron approached, Vanessa took time out from her flirting to greet them.

"You weren't *quick* enough," she scolded, "So this *nice* boy helped me." The caterer failed to realize how condescending Vanessa was being toward him. Instead, he seemed awestruck by her presence. And Vanessa's reference to him gave him an exciting opportunity to introduce himself to his host.

"Hi, I'm Peter," he said introducing himself. "Very glad to meet you."

"Hi," Jack said simply, hardly paying attention.

"Wow!" Peter gushed. "Meeting two big stars. I mean, obviously, since this is your house, you might be here, you know? But Vanessa Chimera, too."

Ron cleared his throat. "I've done some television work as well," he interjected stiffly.

"Oh, cool," Peter said, suddenly uncomfortable. He recovered with, "But Vanessa Chimera, man! Look at her!" Vanessa was eating up the adoration. "Meeting her is a bigger bonus than the sneaker-phone that comes with a magazine subscription! Totally!"

The guy's running at the mouth, Jack thought to himself. People like that really got to Jack. And Vanessa knew it. She had a knack for picking those people out. And the habit of throwing them at Jack. Well, he wasn't going to let her get to him tonight. It was *his* night, and he wouldn't let her ruin it.

"Well, after you're off work, I hope you'll stay," Jack told him cheerfully, parrying Vanessa's thrust. She smiled, knowing the game was on. And that her «pawn» would make the next move for her.

"Listen, Jack…" Peter paused a second, panic in his eyes. "I hope I can call you that." Jack nodded slightly. Peter relaxed and pulled over an olive-skinned female co-worker.

"RePete!" the co-worker screeched as she spilled the punch she had been serving to someone.

RePete. The name struck a chord somewhere in Jack's brain. It was a sinister, minor chord, but he couldn't identify it. *Maybe later,* he thought, *when I have some room to think, it'll come to me.*

Peter pushed the girl toward Jack. She resisted, very bashful.

"This is Maria," Peter said. "She's a huge, huge fan, but she's too shy to introduce herself."

Jack looked at the girl, who was standing too close for comfort. She was pretty, Jack thought. And she had a major jones for him, he could tell. Another occupational hazard: meeting people who developed crushes on you — on who they *thought* you were, Jack corrected himself. Another reason he had kept out of the limelight since the fire. Too many demands by people with the wrong ideas.

"Hi," said Maria, her face flushing deeply.

Jack saw out of the corner of his eye that Vanessa was studying him. She expected him to break now. She would be disappointed.

"Glad you're here," Jack told Maria with all the sincerity he could muster. At least Maria was pretty. *Not my type,* he thought. *But a looker even so.* "You'll stay later, too, won't you?"

Maria looked like she had just been asked to sit at the Round Table.

"I'd be honored," she said, wide-eyed. "Thank you."

Her behavior unsettled Jack a bit. People who formed attachments as quickly as Maria made him nervous. If unrealistic expectations weren't met, things could turn sour very quickly. That had occurred once already with the obsessed fan in Los Angeles. Several times, she had managed to enter his house. One time, he had arrived home to find her cooking dinner for him. Despite the psychiatric evaluations, and the restraining orders, the woman kept returning. He needed her, she claimed. Jack had tried to be understanding through the ordeal. But finally, when he came home to find her soaking in a luxurious bubble bath, his frustration got the best of him. His words to her that time were relentlessly cruel. Finally, she took his rejection to heart, calling him a horrible person — in between expletives. That was the good news.

The bad news was that his house was burned to the ground less than a month later.

The fan's involvement was never proved, but Jack knew in his heart that she was responsible. The loss of his house, on the heels of so much else, almost caused him to crack up. But with the help of his friends, primarily Ron, he had come through that episode in one piece. It was Ron who had suggested using the fire as an excuse to lie low, regroup, then emerge more powerful than ever. "You'll be the phoenix rising," Ron had told him.

Now here he was, in his hometown, dealing with infatuated «fans» once again.

"Hey, can I get a picture with you?" RePete asked, holding up a camera. "I don't want to impose. I know it's your party and all, but when am I gonna get this chance again? You know?"

Jack was about to refuse. Then he saw Vanessa's face. She knew he had reached his limit and was waiting for a chance to gloat.

Uh-uh.

Smiling, he pulled Vanessa swiftly to his side. "Might as well get one with all of us," he said cheerfully. Vanessa was about to protest, then saw that she would be the loser if she did. Historically, Vanessa hated photo opportunities even more than Jack. Her plan had backfired, and they both knew it. "Ron, why don't you get in here, too." Then, with evil glee, he told

RePete, "Tell you what. You stand between me and Vanessa, with your arms around us both."

RePete looked thrilled. Vanessa, trumped, scowled at Jack.

"Would you take the picture?" RePete asked Maria.

"Sure," she said softly. As the others got into position, she pointed the camera. She counted off. "One… two… three…"

Everyone smiled and held their breath. But instead of taking the picture, Maria lowered the camera.

"Isn't it advanced?" RePete asked.

"Oh no, it's fine," Maria said. "I was just wondering, if, y'know, I could get a picture with me next." She looked at Jack with hungry eyes. Riding the wave of his victory over Vanessa's attempt to embarrass him, Jack agreed instantly. Maria gave a grateful smile and lifted the camera once more. "One… two… three…" This time, her finger pressed down and the camera gave a satisfying click.

"Here, I'll take your picture," RePete said quickly.

Vanessa turned quickly away. "*I* want to go *dance* now," she announced. She was declaring an end to the contest of wills.

"Well, *I* want you to *leave"* Jack said, mimicking her. "I didn't invite you here."

Vanessa turned on him instantly. "You didn't even have the *decency* to tell me where you *were"* she snarled. "No one walks out on *me*!"

"Well, you better get used to it, Vanessa," replied Jack, taking a step toward her. Vanessa stood her ground, defiant. "With your cuddly personality, I see a whole *slew* of people walking out on you. If they're stupid enough to let you get that close in the first place."

As the argument gathered momentum, Maria and RePete watched, completely forgotten.

"You were stupid enough," Vanessa spat back.

"Yes, but I wised up. We broke up weeks ago. Get it through your skull and get out of here!"

"Are *you* gonna kick me out?" She was in his face, seriously challenging him this time. "Not your hired *goons*, but *you"?* If you have the *guts* to throw me out of here *personally*, I'll go."

Jack locked eyes with Vanessa. Trembling with rage, he grasped her by her wrists. Tightly. He was on the verge of yanking her off her feet and dragging her to the nearest exit. Then he'd be rid of her.

Vanessa, trying not to wince at the pain, looked down. Then slowly, she raised her head, seething with fury.

In a low voice, she spoke slowly, enunciating with precision. "I will *scream.* So *loud."*

They locked gazes again. Then the moment of danger passed and Jack released her. He had come so close.

Looking hard at his watch, he said to Ron, "I have to get the Haunted Mansion going." With a disgusted look at Vanessa, he added, "Deal with her, please. I can't." Spinning on his heels, he walked away.

*** * ***

RePete and Maria, back to serving punch, watched Jack plunge into the crowd. Maria appeared shell-shocked by the scene they had witnessed.

"Guess all the action's over, huh?" RePete asked, with a chummy, nasty smile. "Actors, *Hollywood."* He said the word with great distaste. "They're all trash. Especially Jack Spyder."

"I thought you were a fan," Maria said, confused.

RePete laughed and dropped all pretenses. "Not of anyone in that sorry group. I'll tell you something. I know Jack Spyder, or rather, knew him when he was John Appleby. And he didn't even recognize me. Hee hee." He rubbed his hands together in evil glee. "Is he ever in for it!"

"What are you talking about?"

RePete looked around. Ron and Vanessa stood a few yards from the table in stony silence. Pulling Maria near to him, RePete whispered into her ear.

"You know how the Appleby's still own a lot of the real estate around here, right?" Maria nodded uncertainly. "Now it's all Jack's, although I'm sure he's removed from the day to day stuff. But years ago, his father ran it all himself. He was like one of those robber barons of old. Raymond Appleby. My father used to work for him. He was his right-hand man. But there was only room for one at the top, so my father left to find his own fortunes. And believe it or not, he did. My father turned land Appleby considered worthless into lucrative property."

RePete was no longer into the party. As he gazed ahead, he saw only the past, his father, and his fledgling real estate empire. A look of wonder

stole over his face. Then his eyes narrowed with bitterness.

"Appleby saw my father as a threat to his local monopoly. He initiated several partnerships with my father's firm. A Trojan horse. When the time was right, Appleby took over my father's company, kicked him into the streets. We lost everything."

The spell broke and RePete returned. His eyes blazed with mad energy.

"After that, my father proceeded to drink himself to death. At his funeral, I promised I would find some way to get back at Appleby for what he did. When he died in California in that car accident, I was so bummed. There went my chance for revenge."

"That's a horrible thing to say," Maria told him, horrified. "You don't mean that."

"I mean that so absolutely you could look it up in a dictionary," he declared. "But now little John Appleby has come home, and I've got a skeleton full of bones to pick with him."

"Whatever Mr. Appleby did isn't Jack's fault."

"Sins of the father, Maria. Sins of the father." RePete knew he was scaring Maria. He didn't care.

"What are you going to do, RePete?"

RePete just smiled.

Chapter 5

Jack turned on the wireless microphone he wore on his lapel. As he ascended the stairs, the music faded out.

"It's almost midnight, folks," he announced when he had reached the top and gotten the crowd's attention once more. "The witching hour, the moment when the dark forces of the universe are at their strongest. And tonight," he intoned dramatically, "Halloween Night, Death actually walks among us."

In the crowd, people were exchanging glances. Half of the crowd was amused by Jack's speech. The rest seemed genuinely spooked. *Perfect,* Jack thought.

"In fact, Death has taken up residence in this very mansion." He pointed up the stairs behind him. "He's remodeled a few of the rooms. They have become Death's guest quarters." Jack punctuated his speech with a sinister laugh. "Ladies and gentlemen, if you'll walk up these stairs, you'll discover the joy — and the horror — of… the Haunted Mansion!"

The landing at the top of the right staircase lit up. Immediately, a thick carpet of fog rolled down the stairs. The effect was eerie and impressive. The crowd needed no further encouragement. The revelers swarmed up the stairway, eager to see what surprises their wealthy and inventive host had in store for them.

As the first guests approached the foggy doorway, Jack pushed his way down the stairs and found Rachel.

"Wow! What do you have up there?"

Jack just smiled. "Oh, you'll find out soon enough." He glanced up the stairs expectantly. Moments later, he heard what he was waiting for.

Screams, floating down from the floor above.

At the refreshment table, Vanessa stood beside Ron, scowling.

"Look at them. Excited over a *funhouse,"* she sneered. "Toto, you little *mongrel,* we are *back* in *Kansas."*

"Why so grumpy, Vanessa?" Ron asked her. "Things are going great. Your entrance couldn't have been more perfect."

"I *suppose,"* Vanessa replied skeptically as she smoothed her dress with her hands. "Those *goons* were a little rougher than I expected. I

thought you were going to take care of them? They might *really* have hurt me, you know."

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" Ron said, smiling wickedly. "I decided not to clue them in. I didn't want to risk their giving us away with poor acting."

"You would know about poor acting," Vanessa countered. Then, without warning, she struck him a blow to the shoulder. "That's for letting me nearly get hurt."

"Ouch!" Ron said, rubbing his eyes. But the smile never left his face. If anything, it only took on a harsher edge. "Don't be such a princess. It worked beautifully. Jack's having a *horrible* time."

Vanessa laughed with evil glee. "Yes he *is*!" she declared. "Did you *see?* When I *dared* him to drag me *out* of here?" Ron nodded and smiled. "I was *certain* he was going to *lose* it. It was in his *eyes."*

"You should have seen your eyes, my dear. You were scared."

The observation flustered Vanessa slightly. "Well, *my dear,* I do *believe* there was *murder* in Jack's eyes."

Jack laughed. "Perfect."

"Yes, perfect," Vanessa agreed. Jack Spyder was on the edge, and she had almost pushed him over. It wouldn't take much longer to finish the job. Then everything that was his would be hers. And Ron's, she thought dryly, for a little while.

"Just as well Jack didn't crack right then and there," Ron told her. "The game would have been over before it began."

"Before it began? My sweet, it all began when you burned down his *house* in Beverly *Hills."*

Ron nodded in agreement. "Yes, but I mean this *round* of the game. You only just got here. Would you want him breaking down in your first five minutes? I've taken you for more of a… sportswoman than that."

"Yes, you're right," answered Vanessa, considering the spirit of the matter. "I *did* come all this *way."* She shook her head sadly. "Poor Jack. What did he ever do to deserve what we're doing to him?"

Ron appeared to concentrate very seriously for a moment. Then he just threw up his hands. "Not a darn thing," he answered, as if surprised to have come to that conclusion. "Maybe we should call this off."

With a look of serious concern, he locked eyes with Vanessa. They almost seemed to share the worry that they were doing the wrong thing. But then Ron's lips began to tremble.

Suddenly, they both burst into gales of laughter.

"Sorry," Ron said when he could finally speak again. Vanessa was wiping tears from her eyes. "I couldn't keep a straight face any longer. Can you imagine? Developing a conscience at this late date?"

"I think *not*," Vanessa giggled. Then she searched the crowd. "Where *is* Jack?"

Ron picked him out easily. "At the bottom of the stairs," he said pointing. "With Rachel."

"Oh *yes*. That girl has *old flame* written *all* over her." An idea sprang to mind. "We'll have to find some way to work her into our plan. Set them *against* one another. You know, like they do on *Melrose Place."*

"We may not need to go that far," Ron reminded her. "But we'll see. Why don't you go up to your room and change out of that costume?"

"Might as well," she said, yawning suddenly. "I *hate* wearing period clothes unless I'm getting paid at *least* scale."

At this, the evil smile blazed from Ron's face. "When this little melodrama is over, honey, we'll *both* have made a lot more than scale."

Vanessa's pupils practically turned into dollar signs. "Yes we *will*!" she gushed. Then, with a quick look at the staircase, she found Jack and Rachel again. Their backs were to the refreshment table. Seeing it was safe, she threw her arms around Ron and gave him a long kiss.

"Mmmm… thanks," he said softly.

"It *has* been a while," Vanessa purred. "You've been back and forth between LA and this godforsaken place *forever* it seems."

"All for the greater good," Ron assured her. He then gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "Get going, and I'll cut out the power in a little while, when Jack's in the middle of his Haunted Mansion. We'll end this little soiree. I'll be up shortly thereafter, so we can coordinate tomorrow's festivities."

"Don't keep me *waiting* too *long*. You *know* how I *hate* that." With one last quick kiss — she always had to have the last word and the last kiss — Vanessa turned and walked away.

Ron watched her disappear into the crowd. Smiling to himself, he sauntered away. It was almost time to lower the boom on this little shindig. He was so focused on the task before him, that he didn't hear the quiet click behind him.

* * *

As most of the crowd shuffled forward and up the staircase, two figures furtively edged themselves away. No one noticed them. It was exactly as they had planned.

"As far as I can tell," Todd Winkle told his partner, we've got roughly an hour to loot the west wing."

Van McBride smiled greedily. "Just like *Shop 'Til You Drop* on TV!"

"You watch shows like that?" Todd asked in disbelief. "You wuss."

"Shut up!" Van whined defensively. "Let's just get going, okay?"

"Fine… wuss," Todd couldn't help adding. "You got upstairs, I got down here. Meet you out by the car." Van gave him a thumb's up. "And Van?"

"Yeah?"

"No screwing around, okay?"

"Shut up!" Van snapped, wounded by Todd's lack of faith. "I never screw around."

As Todd started down the long corridor a floor below the festivities and on the opposite side of the house, he thought how easy this was going to be. Easiest take yet in their burglary career. That chump Jack had practically asked them to relieve him of a portion of his valuables. He'd even gone to the trouble of sending them party invitations. *Now that,* Todd thought, *was asking for it.*

Not long ago, they had been protégés of Skrag Morton, acting as his advance team, his lookout, his accomplices, his alibi, and more. Skrag had taught them everything.

Then, of course, Skrag's brain had ended up on the business end of his own jumper cables.

For several months after Skrag's death, Todd and Van had laid low. Convinced their leader had been killed in revenge for some past crime, they felt certain they would be next. But no one came after them. And once they realized no one was going to come after them, they decided to go into business for themselves.

Naturally, Todd ascended to Skrag's position of leadership. Van was too dim-witted for almost everything but taking strict orders and performing explicit tasks. At this, he excelled. But he had one other talent — a gift really — that served him well. Van was a human divining rod, always able

to find the most valuable items in a home, no matter how well their owners hid them.

Todd continued down the corridor, carefully opening each door he came to. As he expected, most of the rooms were empty. Some contained only a few pieces of furniture, sheet-covered to protect them from dust while the house remained unoccupied. The sheets were white, giving the impression that this was not really furniture at all, but the ghosts of furnishings past. The stale air combined with the eerie decor to send a chill through him.

Before long Todd could no longer hear any sounds from the ballroom. He felt as if he was on another planet. A creepy feeling shivered up his spine.

Then he came to the room that made him smile: a bedroom filled with boxes, each box bearing a Los Angeles return address.

"Bingo!" he said out loud. Todd knew he had hit the jackpot. "I'm gonna know soon," he said, and the dead air of the room absorbed his voice like a thirsty sponge. He took a flashlight out of his pocket; turning lights on was a no-no, he had figured out long ago. Pointing the beam of the Maglite over the pile of boxes, Todd approached, ready to help himself to whatever he liked.

*** * ***

Rachel and Jack stood before the curtain of fog that led to the so-called "Haunted Mansion" beyond. Since the first group had crossed the threshold, the screaming had not stopped. Now, ready to plunge into the dangerous unknown herself, Rachel could hear other sounds: the growls of feral beasts, the moans of the dead, the shriek of bats — all before a faint background of Elvis Presley music.

"Are you ready?" Jack asked excitedly. His enthusiasm was contagious. Rachel felt like she was about to have the thrill of her life.

"Let's go!" she said, and together, they forged ahead into the Haunted Mansion. Darkness engulfed them.

When Rachel's eyes adjusted, she found herself in an alcove. It had been painted black, and a glowing arrow pointed left to a door.

"You do the honors," Jack offered. He was watching her expectantly.

Obviously, Rachel thought, *he knows what lies ahead, and wants to see how I react.* Bracing herself for whatever horror lay beyond, Rachel reached for the doorknob. But as soon as she touched it, a shrieking black cloud descended upon them. Bats, with their demonic faces and needle teeth, swarmed all around. Rachel panicked, screaming and struggling with the door that refused to open. Swatting at the creatures, she turned to Jack for help.

He was laughing.

That's when she realized the bats were mechanical. *Of course, you dolt,* she thought. *Like there would be real bats living in an alcove of an occupied building.* But the scare had been exhilarating. As if cued by her awareness, the cloud of bats rose and disappeared into the ceiling. On its own, the door now clicked open. She looked at Jack for some indication of what to do next. Still smiling, Jack simply held out a hand.

Carefully, Rachel walked through the doorway.

The door closed abruptly behind them, shutting out all light and blinding them again. She knew they were in a room, and she could feel that something else was in there with them.

Like an incoming tide, the sounds of a crowd began to fill the air. A bright light burst from the ceiling, illuminating a guillotine on the far wall of the medium-sized room. A robotic executioner, steely eyes peering from his black mask, looked down at his feet. Below, a victim struggled, his head trapped in the yoke of the guillotine. The executioner pulled a rope, and the blade dropped. The sound of a man screaming. Then a gurgling sound. The victim's head fell from the yoke and into a basket, a flood of blood pouring from the remaining stump of a neck. Rachel's screams blended with those of the imaginary crowd as she buried her face into Jack's chest. Instinctively, he encircled her with his arms.

"It's over now. It's okay." He was trying to be soothing. But the amusement in his voice was unmistakable. "Let's go."

"This must have cost you a fortune," Rachel choked out. Looking up, she saw the light fading from the scene, until the room was black once more.

"It did," Jack replied proudly. "But I can tell you it was worth it. I had the whole east wing reconfigured into a sort of a maze and these scenes put in."

"What about after Halloween is over?" Rachel wondered. "You've gone to a lot of trouble for just one day."

Jack nodded lazily. "I dunno. Maybe I'll have tours. I'll figure something out."

A light came up, pointing them in the direction of another door. Jack led the way this time. They didn't even make it to the door. A hideous, huge man sprang from the shadows. Rachel jumped back as the man's arm shot out, thrusting an object at them.

She screamed when she saw what it was.

A severed head.

Chapter 6

The hoop skirt lay on the floor like a pile of shed lizard skin. Vanessa pulled on jeans and a fuzzy sweater. Her hair, which had been braided and piled on top of her head, now hung in silky strands around her neck. Slowly, methodically, Vanessa brushed her hair for maximum gloss, all the while staring blankly into a mirror.

But her mind was not blank. It was registering how familiar the Appleby mansion felt, even though she had never been here before. She remembered a recent and recurring dream. In it, a tiny fairy promised her enormous riches if Vanessa could follow her. The fairy, a glowing ball of light, flitted all about, up and down, sometimes darting forward, then back, then retracing its path. And Vanessa followed. Their surroundings were pitch-black and featureless save for invisible walls. Vanessa was certain that it was through the halls of this mansion that she had chased the fairy in her dream. No matter how high, how fast, or how erratically the fairy had moved, Vanessa had been able to keep up. For the prospect of unlimited wealth, as the fairy had promised, she could will herself to sprout wings and fly.

The nature of the fairy treasure had been revealed for a short moment to Vanessa, but was lost when she abruptly woke up. Whatever the treasure was, it had been wondrous. And though the knowledge vanished once her eyes opened, the feeling of amazement at her own good fortune remained.

Now, in this mansion, the answer would be revealed to her once again. But this time she would hold onto it and it would not vanish.

Screams wafted up from the floor below. Vanessa shivered. She wished all those guests would go away so that tomorrow would come. *Tomorrow,* she mused, *our plan begins.*

Emphasis on *our* plan, she pointed out to herself. After that, *my* plan kicks into gear. It was sad, Vanessa thought. Because once, she had truly loved Jack. But for the moment, Ron was the man with the plan, and Jack was the host who'd be toast.

If only Jack hadn't started ignoring her after his parents had died. They had been happy before then. He had been generous with his affection and his money. Especially his money. Then his parents had perished in some

anonymous traffic accident and Jack had turned inward. For the first few days, Vanessa had been all sensitivity, allowing him his grief. But after that she became bored. When he finally claimed to have gained some sort of perspective on things so that he could cope, he was a changed person. He ceased being fun. The money and the affection stopped flowing. Jack attempted to break up with her, claiming that they weren't right for one another.

As if guys broke up with Vanessa Chimera. Ha!

* * *

Back in the ballroom, the caterers were preparing to leave. RePete dropped two trays during the cleanup process. His co-workers thought he was just jittery from too much caffeine combined with his natural edginess. Only Maria noticed the smile on RePete's face.

"What's your problem?" Maria finally asked. "Is your stupid idea of taking out all your frustrations on Jack making you nervous?"

"You've got a huge crush on that imbecile," RePete charged. "You'd better not tell him any part of what I told you before."

"I don't care to get involved," Maria said evenly, though in fact, she had been keeping an eye on RePete all evening.

"I found something out," RePete whispered. "If I tell you, can you keep a secret? I mean a jumbo, elephant-sized, blue-whale-looks-like-a-guppy-in-comparison secret?"

Maria immediately turned away. "I don't think I should hear it," she said nervously.

RePete laughed at her mousiness. He was certain she wouldn't turn him in. He had dreamed of her lately. And in the dreams, he would talk and talk, a million miles an hour, and she would listen patiently. No matter what he said, she never judged or commented unfavorably, so he had a good feeling now about telling her what he had overheard. Even if what he revealed shocked her, she wouldn't blow his cover.

"Come on," RePete cajoled Maria. "If I don't spill my guts, I'll explode and they'll be splattered all over the room anyway."

"Ugh."

"It's Halloween, Maria. I'm allowed to be gross." He was on a roll now. Things were working out much better than he had dreamed possible. "Just listen to this."

Out of his pocket, RePete produced a microcassette recorder he had been carrying all night. He was on his second tape now, the one with the juicy information. Pressing play, he held the tiny speaker up to Maria's ear. At first, she seemed annoyed at him. Then she realized whose voices she was hearing. And what they were saying. At the end, her mouth dropped open.

"That can't be!" she gasped.

RePete smiled like a cat who had just consumed the entire aviary.

"That's what Ron and Vanessa were muttering about after Jack left. You saw them kiss, so you know they weren't playacting."

"We have to find Jack," she said, her voice rising in panic. "Find him and warn him, right away." She turned abruptly and started toward the stairs. RePete reached out quickly to stop her.

"No no no!" RePete scolded. "We can't do that."

"He'll believe us!" she insisted. "You have the tape."

"Of course I do," RePete said in a soothing voice, though inside, he felt very jumpy. Maybe he had made a mistake telling Maria. Time for some major damage control. "Don't you wonder why I have this tape recorder in the first place?"

Maria stopped trying to pull away and looked down at the device in RePete's hand. She regarded it warily, as if he held a live grenade.

"Does it have to do with your vendetta?"

"Correct-alopolis, my dear!" RePete exclaimed. He pulled her close again. *"The National Enquirer* has hired me to give them the inside scoop on this party. They're paying me five thousand bucks."

"This is your revenge?" Maria asked skeptically.

"Doesn't seem like much, does it?" RePete allowed. "But a few pictures here, an out-of-context statement there… it starts to add up. Mix in a generous dose of creative interpretation and I've got a whizbang story that's gonna knock ol' Jack here on his keester for good. Hollywood will never look at him again. And think how the local gentry will react to reports that, oh, an orgy took place here this evening, when the kids insisted it would all be good, clean fun."

"He'd have nowhere to go," Maria realized. "He certainly couldn't settle comfortably in Springwood if that happened."

"You've got the picture," RePete said cheerfully. "And now, with this real dirt, I can probably double my asking price." He looked off into space again, the possibilities swimming before his eyes. Then it hit him. "Better yet, I'll sit on it. Wait till the whole thing comes down, then write a book about it. With my evidence, I'll be able to sell it for tons of money."

Maria was speechless with shock, but RePete didn't notice. He had come up with the perfect revenge: Jack would be destroyed, mentally as well as professionally, and he, Pete Peters, would profit from it.

"You can't do that," Maria said, her voice taking on a surprisingly threatening tone. "I can't let you. I won't let you."

RePete was so surprised by her protest, he nearly believed her for a moment. Then he remembered who he was dealing with: the ineffectual drama queen of Springwood High.

"Maria," he said almost casually. "You have to realize that there's nothing you can do now to prevent it. Who would believe you? And who really cares about Jack Spyder anyway? These kids," he said, gesturing to the dwindling crowd, "they don't care. They're just trying to get a freebie. Jack himself probably wouldn't let you get anywhere near him. He's got Ron to protect him from the riffraff." He then delivered the coup de grace. "Telling Ron or Miss Vanessa Snoot-Nose would be a very bad idea for both of us, don't you think? You don't want them to know that you know their dirty little secret. If they're not afraid to ruin a big, visible star like Jack Spyder, what do you think they'd do to little country-bumpkin nobodies like us?"

His arguments seemed to be working. Maria stared at him, her eyes huge, as the enormity of what he was suggesting soaked in.

Maria seemed to agree that she was trapped by circumstance. She nodded slowly. "Okay," she said, almost shell-shocked. "I won't say anything."

But RePete wasn't convinced. "You gotta promise me." He drew Maria's gaze into his own. "If you promise me you won't say anything, I'll believe you. Then I won't have to be worried." By the look on Maria's face, RePete didn't have to worry, but he just wanted to seal the deal anyway.

Maria hesitated a moment. Then her shoulders sagged. "Okay. I promise."

To show he was a good sport, RePete gave her a quick kiss on the forehead.

"Don't worry. It'll be all right. I'll even cut you in when the big bucks start raining down like ashes from Mount Saint Helens." The offer failed to cheer Maria. *Just as well,* RePete thought. *I ain't sharing with no one, no how.* "Looks like we're done," he said, surveying the area that neither of them had helped finish clearing. "You staying or going?"

"I'd better go home," Maria sighed. "I couldn't stay here under the circumstances."

"Good girl," RePete told her. "Best not tempt yourself to cause trouble by hanging around. I'm going to head out to my car, then come back and see how the rest of the evening shakes out. See what shaking I can do myself," he added with an evil wink.

Maria just shook her head sadly and walked away.

*** * ***

A door creaked open in the west wing of the mansion. As soon as Todd shined in his flashlight, he knew he had struck paydirt. The cone of light before him revealed a formal study. The smell of leather and wood was strong here. This was clearly a room left over from the days when the Appleby family had occupied the mansion. Under one large sheet stood a huge, mahogany desk. No doubt old man Appleby had sat behind it, looking at a map of Springwood like he was the only king working a checkerboard.

Slicing up the darkness with the flashlight, Todd found paintings, ceiling-high shelves of books, and most strikingly, an enormous, stuffed polar bear he guessed must have been twelve feet tall.

As he stared into the bear's snarling face, the door behind him creaked once more, then clicked softly closed. Todd spun quickly, his flashlight extended like a sword, but no one was there. He tried to hold himself together. After all, old houses played little tricks like that. At least, that's what everyone said.

Todd took a second look at the paintings. There was sure to be a safe hiding behind one of them. All the old libraries and studies had them. And who was to say the Applebys didn't leave a few thousand stashed away here. Maybe nobody had ever been informed about it. After all, the

Applebys hadn't planned to die. Blinded by the prospect of riches, it never occurred to him that he had no idea how to crack a safe. He single-mindedly searched the room, oblivious of all else but his hunt for the safe.

So he didn't feel the presence in the room with him.

Nor did he hear the footsteps behind him.

And he didn't have a chance to scream as a hand clamped tightly over his mouth.

Chapter 7

In the zombie room, Jack became distracted. He and Rachel had just entered, disturbing a group of mechanical zombies feeding on a fresh victim. When the zombies rose and began to amble in their direction, Rachel shrieked in fear and delight, tugging desperately on Jack's sleeve, trying to get him out of the room before they were eaten. But when she looked at his face, he seemed a million miles away.

The zombies were advancing. In a panic, Rachel shouldered Jack into the next room just in the nick of time.

Jack turned to her, surprised. She was about to ask him what was wrong, but then eerie music wafted out from the room's hidden speakers. A wolf howled in the distance. As the lights came up, they found themselves in a graveyard, ankle deep in an evil mist.

"Welcome," a deep voice with a Hungarian accent greeted them. The voice seemed to come from everywhere. "You're just in time for dinner. *My* dinner."

The room was then filled with sinister laughter. In the center of the room a mausoleum became visible. A plaque on its face read DRACULA. The rusty gate at its entrance shook. Something was trying to get out. Finally, the lock burst into dust and the gate began to swing open. From the darkness within, one clawed hand emerged and gripped the side of the entrance. On one finger was a ring with a single, ebony stone.

"Care to join me in an aperitif?" the voice asked seductively. "Care to *be* my aperitif?"

From the crypt emerged an elegantly dressed man wearing a cape. Its inner lining was a deep scarlet. The man smiled, revealing two sharp canine teeth. In anticipation of a feast, they started to drip blood.

"Something's wrong," Jack said suddenly.

"What's wrong?" asked Rachel, noticing the troubled look on Jack's face.

Jack shook his head. "I've felt this since Vanessa arrived. Something — or someone — is not right here."

Raising his hands menacingly into the air, Dracula started coming for them.

* * *

RePete checked his reflection as best he could in his Subaru's sideview mirror. From head to toe, he was covered in surgical bandages. The next phase of his plan was to infiltrate the party. Dressed as a mummy, he would have free reign over the house. No one would have the slightest idea who he was.

Perfect.

He'd be indistinguishable from the other guests. And able to dig up plenty of dirt as he roamed the halls of Appleby Mansion.

After making the face mask more secure, he grabbed the microcassette tape recorder from the front seat and gave himself a final once over.

I'm Spider-Man, RePete thought. *In costume, anonymous, and out to right wrongs. Of course, I'm more revenge-oriented than Spider-Man. So maybe I'm really The Shadow. Yes, that's it. The evil that lurks in the hearts of men? Been there. Done that…*

A surprise blow to his back knocked RePete forward. The recorder flew from his hands as his stomach caught the sideview mirror, deflating his lungs in an instant. The mirror snapped off as RePete crumpled to the ground. Gasping, he saw the recorder land inches from his face. Beyond it were a pair of mismatched shoes. Instinctively, RePete reached for the recorder, but before his hand could touch it, one of the shoes smashed it viciously. Splinters of plastic bounced off RePete's face. He withdrew his hand, dimly aware that if he had actually reached the recorder, splinters of bone from his own hand would be bouncing off his face.

* * *

Groaning, RePete rolled onto his back and looked up. Hateful eyes stared down at him. They were moving toward him now, and he saw clenched fists. RePete could not move. It seemed his only option was to lie there and prepare to die.

In order to escape Dracula, Rachel and Jack had to dodge the giant bat that flew at them. Finally, they escaped, into a room featuring not just a king of the undead, but the King himself.

In a bizarrely humorous break from the wanton fright and carnage of the previous rooms, this chamber contained a shrine to Elvis Presley.

Before them, bloated and blue, Elvis hunched over a toilet. Pills littered the ground at his feet. There were no sounds of screaming or murder. Instead, the soundtrack played the gentle murmur of a Graceland crowd of tourists — and the constant sound of a toilet flushing.

"You're a weirdo," Rachel laughed.

"Ron's idea, actually," Jack told her. "He's the Elvis freak, in case you hadn't noticed."

Rachel had. "So why do you keep saying something's wrong? The party's going great, except for the scene with that Vanessa, and barely anyone saw that."

"That's not it," Jack replied, racking his brain. "It has nothing to do with her. It has to do with…" An idea seemed to come to him. "That caterer," he concluded uncertainly.

"Maria?" Rachel wondered, remembering that the girl had never had her picture taken with Jack and Vanessa.

Jack shook his head. "Not her. The guy. What's his name?"

"You mean RePete? Pete Peters?"

Suddenly, a lightbulb seemed to turn on in Jack's head.

"Peters! That's it!" It was all very clear to him now. But Rachel was stumped.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

Jack turned to her excitedly. "Do you remember, back when I lived here, that something happened between my father and a former employee of his?"

Rachel thought back. At six or seven, reading the front page of the newspaper had not been a top priority. But she did recall something.

"Was there some sort of dispute over land?"

"This is what happened. This former employee of my father's goes into business for himself. Gets lucky with a few developments and starts to do well. But this guy doesn't really know what he's doing, so things start to go wrong. My father, who wants this guy to succeed, helps out."

"Why would he want a potential competitor to succeed?" Rachel wondered aloud.

"Lots of reasons. Competition is more interesting than always getting your way, which is how it was for my father back then. And he considered

his employees sort of like family, so he wanted them to succeed. But there was a selfish reason, too. He felt that the failure of anyone associated with him, even if they no longer worked for him, was a reflection on himself. So, for everybody's sake, my father formed partnerships with this guy, trying to take him under his wing again, give him some pointers.

"But the ex-employee had gotten very proud, despite the fact that he was a screw-up. He wouldn't listen to a word my father said. When properties started failing and deals began to fall through, my father still tried to help, and he pumped a lot of money into this guy's business. The guy develops a drinking problem, things go totally to hell, and my father buys the guy out as the only way to salvage the business."

"That was Peter Peters father?" Something about the story resonated in Rachel's brain. It had been so long ago. And irrelevant to her young life. But something else had happened. "Your father was in the hospital once, I think. Right?"

Jack nodded gravely. "Yes. After it all came down, Mr. Peters went on a drinking binge. He told any and everyone who would listen — and by this time, there weren't many — that my father was a crook and had cheated him out of his business. He blamed my father for everything.

"Then, with the last of his dwindling money, Mr. Peters hired a couple of goons to jump my father and beat him within an inch of his life."

"He did *that?"* Rachel was horrified. "I remember he was in the hospital, but I was never told why."

"Yes, Pete Peter's dad," Jack told her. "But luckily, they were the best heavies Mr. Peters' money could buy. And he didn't have much money, so the thugs didn't do a very good job. My father didn't press charges, even though he could have very easily. Still, I think it's one of the reasons my parents decided to move to Los Angeles when I got the part on *Nutt House.* He figured, if you're going to live in a place where you're not safe, where your neighbors will hire people to beat you up or kill you, you might as well live in Los Angeles and at least be able to go to the beach every day."

Rachel laughed. "Your father was pretty cool. I always thought so."

Jack smiled sadly. "Yeah."

*** * ***

"What's… your… problem?" Todd screamed when he got Van's hand off his mouth.

"Gotcha!" Van giggled like a moron. "If I find some Depends in the house, I'll grab some for ya."

"Why aren't you upstairs?" Todd asked, out of breath and seething with anger. Embarrassment over letting his guard down put him in a sudden bad mood.

"Oh, I kept hearing everyone screaming and having a good time and I thought I'd see if you wanted to bag the operation for now and go through the Haunted Mansion."

"Are you nuts, Robin Hood?" Todd gasped. "We came here to steal from the rich and give to the poor. Which would be us! There isn't even any alcohol, and you call this a party?"

"Yeah, but Todd," whined Van, "the Haunted Mansion sounds so *cool.* C'mon, we may never get another chance to come back here."

"Right," Todd told him calmly. "Which is why we have to get what we can out of here *now, tonight,* because when this party's over, I have a feeling we're not exactly going to be on Jack Spyder's short list for invitations."

"We might if we just went out there and joined the party," Van mumbled in response.

Todd had had enough of Van's… wuss-ocity. "Go back upstairs and do the job you're supposed to do."

Van went reluctantly.

For a few minutes, Todd worried that Van had ditched the plan and rejoined the festivities. That would be insubordination, which was not in the Van McBride playbook. Whining definitely was one of Van's more popular plays, but ignoring orders hadn't been, until now.

It was no use checking on him, Todd had finally decided. It would just be more time wasted. If Van had resumed partying, then fine. He wouldn't get any cut of whatever loot Todd carried out of the mansion. And it would be the end of their friendship.

Todd's mood darkened further. In addition to everything else, he realized that he also wanted to rejoin the party.

Todd glanced around the room. It seemed depressingly devoid of anything lootable. The paintings seemed the most valuable, but they were the most difficult pieces to remove from the premises. The books might be

valuable especially the old ones with the leather covers. But books were boring, even if they smelled nice. Eventually, they demanded to be read.

And who needs that kind of pressure? Todd asked himself.

Then his eyes traveled to the one object that seemed valuable and eminently stealable. This was a rifle mounted on the wall near the polar bear. According to the inscription, it was the very gun that had brought down the bear. Todd took it down off the wall to examine it. According to what he knew from trips to the firing range with his Uncle Beau, the gun seemed to be in working order. However, it was unloaded.

Placing the rifle on the desktop, Todd searched the drawers for ammunition.

*** * ***

Slammed to the ground, RePete expected the white boot of the Vegas Elvis to do to his head what the blue suede shoe of the young Elvis had done to his cassette recorder. But once that little piece of spy equipment was destroyed, Ron became almost solicitous.

"Hey, sorry buddy," Ron said, a smile on his face as he helped RePete to his feet. "I'm glad we're finally getting a chance to meet."

"What are you talking about," RePete groaned, his back aching.

"I've been looking for the tabloid mole all night," Ron explained. "Maria gave you away."

RePete groaned again.

"She's been one of my local spies since I arrived. She's got an obvious thing for Jack — wants to help him. She has no idea that she's just introduced me to the perfect accomplice." RePete stared at him in silence. Slowly, it dawned on him that Ron was serious.

"I'll make you a deal," Ron offered. "I'll get you back into the party and help you get the photos you want. Sorry about your tape recorder, but it wouldn't do to have proof of what I was doing floating around. How about this? I'll replace the recorder, repair the broken-off car mirror and pay you a healthy bonus on top of the tabloid pay for a good story. But the story will be the one that *I* write."

RePete grinned and nodded. They shook hands.

"Wait ten minutes, then come to the kitchen door," Ron instructed. "I'll make sure it's unlocked."

* * *

Ten minutes later, a mummy shambled up to the kitchen entrance of the mansion. Reaching out a bandaged hand, it turned the knob. The door swung open.

He lumbered into the kitchen. His authentic, shambling walk was not due to any disciplined study of mummy movies. The bruise on his back from Ron's sucker punch was making him walk funny. And the way it felt, he'd be walking this way for many days to come.

Maria. Her name was a bitter echo in his head.

Now Jack was no longer the sole target of his wrath. Maria would be next. She would have to pay the price of betrayal. If not for the unfinished business here at the mansion — and the sizable bonus Ron had promised — dealing with her would have been RePete's first choice. But she would get hers soon enough. Right now it was Jack's turn. And eventually, Ron and Vanessa would be undone as well, because Ron had made a couple serious mistakes.

One, the sneak attack had been unnecessary — and unnecessarily rough. Had Ron just confronted him, they could have come to an agreement without any use of force.

And two, Ron had destroyed the recorder, but not the cassette containing him and Vanessa scheming. RePete had changed tapes before donning his costume. The tape in the recorder at the time had been blank, and the incriminating tape was safely locked in the Suburu's glove compartment. And when it came out, that would be the end of Ron's little scheme.

These Hollywood types with their arrogance. They made him sick. Fade to black on Ron, as they said in movie scripts. Fade to black on them all, RePete thought sinisterly.

That's when the kitchen went black — all at once.

Chapter 8

Elvis winked out of existence. At the same moment, the artificial Graceland crowds fell silent. Other voices, however, real voices, were heard mumbling in confusion and amusement at the blackout.

"I was afraid of this," Jack huffed angrily. "I wanted to hire a company that wires big amusement parks, but Ron talked me into going local. Idiot me. I thought helping out local business might be a nice gesture."

"It was," Rachel encouraged him. She felt a bit nervous, but not only because of the darkness. Jack seemed so agitated.

"But they obviously can't handle stuff like this," he said. She couldn't see him, but from the sound of his voice she could tell he was pacing.

"Stand still!" Rachel told him, reaching out a hand. She caught his arm. "And calm down." He stopped, but she could hear his rapid, heavy breathing. "We should get out of here and make sure everyone's all right."

Suddenly, the room fell absolutely silent. If she hadn't been touching him, she would have thought Jack had disappeared. When he finally sighed heavily, Rachel realized that he had caught his breath.

"Right," he said with resignation. "Let's get going before someone gets hurt and sues the hell out of me. That's all I…"

Rachel heard Jack's foot kick something solid. Then there was a large crash as he fell to the ground. The room fell silent again.

"Jack?" she cried, standing still. "Are you all right?"

There was no answer. She started forward again, then stopped herself. If Jack had tripped on something, she might, too. Lowering herself to a crouch, she reached her hands out along the floor in front of her.

"Jack?" she said loudly. Still no answer. And no sound of his breathing, either. "Can you hear me, Jack?"

Just then, Rachel's hand brushed up against some fabric. A cape. She had found Jack's cape. And underneath it, as if covered by a burial shroud, was Jack. Next to him, the floor rose about three inches. Apparently, Jack had tripped there.

His body felt warm. But at first, Rachel couldn't find his heartbeat. Then she realized that his costume was too thick. She found his neck and a pulse, albeit a weak one.

"Jack?" she said gently, once more as she touched his face. The skin was clammy, almost slick with sweat. The slickness continued up to his head. Something was very wrong. But it was too dark to see.

Then she remembered the safety lights of her costume. Finding the switch, she turned them on. In the dim lights, it appeared that someone had poured black paint over Jack's face. Then Rachel noticed the same stuff on her hands. She rubbed two fingers together; it was the same, slick feeling. This was not sweat, nor was it paint, she realized with a surge of panic.

"Jack!" she cried, leaning forward so the light was directly in his face. There, the substance showed the faintest trace of red. Blood. Jack had struck his head and was bleeding. Badly.

Rachel rose quickly.

"Help!" she cried, rushing toward the door. "Jack's hurt. Somebody help!"

Then her foot caught on Jack's splayed leg and she went down herself, screaming.

* * *

Ron Marchant started for the basement steps. He had stayed down there too long. Time to start helping people out of the house.

As much as he didn't want to.

It was important that he be witnessed assisting others. That way, in case of any other casualties — *Oh, and there* will *be other casualties,* he told himself — he would avoid blame. He clicked on the flashlight he had hidden next to the circuit breakers. It illuminated the stairs that led to the kitchen above.

Hot properties, these flashlights, he said to himself. Out loud, he whispered in a little singsong, "The party's over!"

"Yes it is," snarled an unexpected voice coming down the stairs.

Ron was just able to shine the flashlight on the figure when it was knocked from his hand. He caught a glimpse of bandages — and a knife.

* * *

Damn! Damn! Damn! Todd thought. *The party's over. And I didn't find a damn cool thing.*

'Cept this gun, of course.

He sighed. There was no use in searching through the dark. No doubt everybody would be leaving the party now. So he and Van had to make their move immediately. It wouldn't do to be stuck in this place after hours.

Todd just hoped that Van had the sense to get out while the getting was good. An early end to the party had not been among their contingencies.

Looking out the window, Todd could see a steady stream of guests heading for their cars. He noticed how the power outage seemed confined to the house. *Ol' Jacko's finally blown a fuse then,* he mused. This caused Todd to smile, despite his disappointment in the paucity of the night's take.

If I could get away with carting off that polar bear, I'd do it, he thought. Enough light came in from outside to make the polar bear appear to glow. He raised the rifle and sighted the bear.

"Pow!" he said pretending to squeeze the trigger. "Right between the eyes."

Then the door to the study creaked open again. This time, Todd did not spin around frantically. Instead, he ignored it, and pretended to shoot the bear one more time.

I know you're there, Van, old buddy old pal, he thought. *You're not gonna catch me again. Maybe this time, I have a scare for you.*

He could feel the presence in the room. No doubt Van was lurking, probably only a few steps behind Todd. A good magician only does a trick once, Todd's father used to say. But Van wasn't a good magician, or mathematician, or any kind of — *tician.* He was only a sort of idiot-savant burglar.

"Ha!" Todd yelled, and spun around, the gun at ready. He pulled the trigger, but since it was unloaded there was only a click. Even that would have been enough to unloose the most watertight of bladders.

Had anyone been in the rifle's sights.

Van was not there. The room was empty. Todd had just psyched himself out. Feeling foolish, he turned back to the polar bear.

"Don't tell anyone," he confided, "but it appears I'm a wuss."

Amazingly, the bear seemed to nod in agreement.

"What the…?" he said, approaching the polar bear. Looking up, he saw the bear continuing to nod. Then he realized, it wasn't nodding at all, but

rocking. Back and forth. Then the rocking movement became more pronounced. Todd tried to peer around the bear, but its bulk obscured whoever was behind it.

Because certainly someone must be behind the bear. How could it move otherwise?

"Van, quit it, you moron!" He moved closer despite the now-violent rocking. "You're gonna knock that thing over." No answer. "And in case you're wondering, I'm not a wuss… you wuss."

Todd looked down between the legs of the bear. As he did, the bear, with the groan of a redwood being felled, toppled forward. Todd looked up just in time to see the toothy mouth of a twelve-foot polar bear zooming in on his face.

He knew he should have jumped aside, but his instinct was to flee. He turned tail and ran like a scared rabbit.

Or at least, he meant to run. But his feet got caught up in the molasses of his own panic, and the bear slammed down mightily on top of him. As Todd hit the ground, the bear's teeth dug into the back of his neck, and the claws ripped through his arms, staking them to the ground.

As the life drained from him, Todd remembered a childhood conversation he'd shared with his father.

"You mean there's no Santa Claus?" little Todd had asked, after his crying had subsided. "What happened to him?"

"The polar bears got 'im," his father had said gruffly. "And ate the elves like they was popcorn."

* * *

Rachel carefully edged her way out of the guillotine room. When she had tripped over Jack, she had come only inches from braining herself on the door. So she steadied her breathing, stood carefully, and shifted herself into slow motion. Jack was hurt. But it wouldn't help him if she went too fast and incapacitated herself in the process.

As a result, it took her some time to navigate her way across the room, even with her safety lights. Occasionally, she called out for help, but gave up after getting no response. Others must be leaving, and on a night like tonight, even with the lights out, cries of terror were just part of the scenery.

Rachel didn't see a soul until she reached the top of the ballroom stairway. Light from the outside illuminated a motley crowd heading for the exits. Security staff with flashlights guided people out of the mansion. Rachel flew down the stairs and ran for the first people she saw.

"Doug! Laura! You've got to help Jack."

The benevolent Bonnie and Clyde turned to her.

"What's wrong?" Laura asked, instantly alarmed.

"Jack and I were in one of the rooms," she said breathlessly, "and when we tried to leave, he tripped and fell and hit his head. He's bleeding badly." Rachel began to cry. "I would have gotten down sooner, but it was so dark, I was afraid of falling. He's bleeding. He needs help…"

"Slow down," Doug said, grasping her shoulder to steady her. "Which room?"

"The Elvis room."

"I'll be right back," he said to Laura. Laura nodded, and he pushed his way through the crowd toward the exit.

"It'll be all right," Laura said. Rachel wiped her tears and tried to pull herself together. Doug returned with a flashlight.

"Okay, one of the security guards is calling an ambulance."

"But we're so far from town," Rachel pointed out.

"Right. So we're gonna go up there ourselves right now. Let's go."

They retraced Rachel's steps back to the Elvis room. The light made the going easier, but without full illumination, they still couldn't race. Finally, they reached the Elvis room.

And it was empty.

"See?" Rachel said, pointing to a dark spot on the floor. "He was lying there. That's his blood."

Without hesitation, Doug stooped down and put his finger to the stain.

"It sure ain't motor oil," he said gravely.

"He must have wandered off. We have to find him." Rachel's voice was rising again.

"He didn't go toward the ballroom," Laura said. "Or we would have seen him. Unless he knows some secret passageways in this place. In a place this big, I wouldn't be surprised."

"I don't think so. Look." Doug said, pointing with the flashlight. Droplets of blood traced a path to the next room.

Rachel darted forward. "Hurry! He's hurt badly." Throwing the door open, she peered into the blackness beyond. "Bring that flashlight, Doug."

Doug appeared beside her and shined the light into the room. Empty. The blood drops stopped halfway across the room.

"Check the display," Rachel told them.

As Doug turned his flashlight toward the platform, Laura began sniffing the air.

"Do you guys smell something?" she asked.

Before either Doug or Rachel had a chance to answer, the flashlight beam fell upon a pair of shoes on the platform. All three pairs of eyes watched as Doug swept the flashlight beam up to illuminate the figure standing there.

"Jack?" Doug called out tentatively. But at the sight of the charred, red and green sweater, they knew it wasn't Jack.

"No!" gasped Laura.

All three froze in place. Before them, his burned face snarling with rage, a lethal claw raised in the air ready to strike, stood none other than Freddy Krueger.

Chapter 9

Van McBride felt like Anti-Claus — that is, the opposite of Santa Claus. Whistling a holiday tune like a funeral dirge, he walked through the halls with a pillowcase slung over his shoulder. It was full of goodies he had plundered from the mansion.

This party seemed like more fun than either Van or Todd had seen in a long while. But that apparently didn't matter to Todd, who had been, as usual, pretty mean and made Van get back to work. On his way back upstairs, Van had considered ditching Todd. Ever since Skrag had died, Todd had gotten a really big head. He was trying to be Skrag, and in Van's silent opinion, Todd had only a shade of their former mentor's criminal genius.

Of course, I'm no Professor Moriarty, Van admitted to himself, remembering Sherlock Holmes' nemesis. *But at least I know that about myself.* Todd was trying to be something he was not. And this playacting was getting tired, especially since it always turned out that Todd got all the good loot while Van got almost nothing.

Todd was right about one thing, though. This mansion was a gold mine.

So Van returned to pillaging, resisting the urge to run off and join the party every time he heard a scream or shout that indicated that people were having fun elsewhere in the mansion. Finally, he became immune to the sounds and found a treasure trove of jewelry in a room that must have belonged to Jack's mother.

The sack on his shoulder swelled to the limit with earrings, necklaces, and other assorted precious baubles.

It was near the end of the hallway that he noticed the silence. The cheerful screams had ceased. For some reason, the fun had stopped. Then came the sound of car engines starting. Rushing to the nearest front room, Van saw what was happening but at first, couldn't tell why. Clearly, the party had ended. And by the looks of it, all at once. He and Todd had to get out of there, and fast.

One step into the hallway, he realized his dilemma. He had a pillowcase full of stolen items, and getting it out of the house would now be

a problem. He certainly couldn't go walking out the front door with it. But he couldn't leave it behind, either. That would make tonight a total failure. No fun and no loot.

In a moment of inspiration, Van spun around and ran to the end of the hallway. The flashlight beam revealed exactly what he expected to find: a small door about four feet off the floor.

In some old movie — he couldn't recall exactly which one — there had been a large mansion, just like this one. There had been a dumbwaiter to transport food between the kitchen and the dining room above. Van pulled open the little door now and sure enough, he found his dumbwaiter. It looked to be just the right size to take his pillowcase full of goodies downstairs for him so he wouldn't have to walk through the house with it.

Inside the dumbwaiter was a small panel with two buttons, one marked up and the other down. Van pressed the up button to call the dumbwaiter.

Nothing happened.

Pressing it another few times to no avail, he almost thought he was sunk. At least he finally understood why everyone was leaving the party. The power was out. Then he noticed the pulley cords for the dumbwaiter. No reason why it shouldn't work manually, he reasoned. He gave one of the cords a sharp tug. Nothing. But he might be pulling in the wrong direction, so he tried again. It gave a little. Grunting, he pulled harder. It gave more. He shined the flashlight down the shaft. Following the cords, he spied what appeared to be the top of the dumbwaiter. He gave the rope another sharp pull, then looked down the shaft again. The dumbwaiter had moved closer. It would take some effort, but his plan would work.

About the time he figured the dumbwaiter was halfway to him, a lone scream echoed from some other part of the mansion. The sound of it gave him a chill. Van turned sharply. That wasn't a happy scream, he thought. Someone had just had a major scare. Then another sound struck him. It was a squeak as the pulleys of the dumbwaiter began turning of their own accord. The dumbwaiter was moving downward.

Instinctively, Van reached in and grabbed the ropes to stop the dumbwaiter. They fought him a little, but the pulleys stopped turning.

Was someone down there? he wondered. Or had the pulleys just turned on their own to undo his efforts? The only person he could imagine being on the other end of the dumbwaiter was Todd, and he wasn't the type to fool around.

Nah, that's not Todd's style, Van concluded. *Must be my old arch-enemy gravity causing problems.* So he reached into the shaft once more and pulled on the ropes. The dumbwaiter came easily for a few feet, then hitched. Van gave it some play, then pulled again. He encountered the same resistance, but each time he made more headway. He was reminded of fishing — letting it run, then reeling in a little, letting it run, reeling it in — until he finally «landed» the dumbwaiter.

"You little bugger," Van scolded the dumbwaiter. "I oughta fillet you." As he loaded the pillowcase of jewelry into the dumbwaiter and secured its contents, Van relaxed again.

Oh oh oh, the Anti-Claus was back in business.

Then the dumbwaiter dropped suddenly. It fell so quickly that Van had no time to pull out his hands, and in an instant, his forearms were trapped. Van felt the crushing pressure and heard a scream… his own. It was getting worse. He was trapped. It wasn't gravity that had made the dumbwaiter fall. Someone had pulled it down and was still pulling. Soon, more than Van's circulation would be cut off. His hands were already numb.

Despite the pain, Van resisted calling out again. Drawing attention to himself would only get him caught with the goods. Besides, he still held out hope that this was one of Todd's particularly cruel jokes. Perhaps his suggestion to call off the burglary had upset Todd more than it had seemed at the time. Whatever the case, if this was Todd, their days as a team were over. *I may be dumb, but I'm not an idiot,* Van thought, stifling a shout of pain. *I don't have to take this kind of abuse.*

Just then, the dumbwaiter took a breather. It didn't let up entirely — Van's arms were still tightly wedged — but the intense downward pressure eased. Then, just as suddenly, the pressure increased again, and this time, Van was certain his arms were going to be severed. A cry of pain escaped his lips.

"Stop that!" he shouted.

And it did stop. His hands were now quite numb and he was quite stuck, but the dumbwaiter stopped moving. Now, maybe if he could think through the pain, he could find a way to extricate himself.

Instead, another thought pierced through the red veil of agony. The significance of the last burst of pressure from the dumbwaiter hit him. That was the feeling of the dumbwaiter being wedged in place. This would allow

whoever was responsible to leave it. But to do what? Was he about to get caught stealing?

"Help!" he yelled, shocked by the sound of his own voice after so much silence. And to hell with being caught. If he didn't get his arms out soon, they'd probably have to be amputated. The mansion seemed just to swallow up his voice. He couldn't see how anyone would hear him. But he had to try. "Help me! I'm stuck up here!"

As his voice died away, Van thought he heard the sound of footsteps in the distance behind him. He fell silent, craning his neck to hear better. But the sound stopped. Maybe he had heard nothing. The impeded circulation in his arms was making him dizzy.

He felt sick. He leaned in closer to the dumbwaiter. "Help!" he shouted down the shaft. The dumbwaiter itself absorbed much of the sound, but much of it reverberated down the shaft. This success cut through his thickening haze and gave him hope. He leaned down again.

"Up here! Anyone! I'm up here and I need help!"

"Quit shouting, I'm here," came a sudden voice behind him.

Van was so surprised and pleased, he tried to turn quickly, to see his savior, and only succeeded in nearly ripping his arms from their sockets.

"Ow!" he cried. Then, gingerly craning his neck again, he tried to look behind him. It was too dark to see who it was. "Thanks," he started to blubber, already trying to figure out how to explain the situation. "I'm kinda stuck here, and…"

"Try and steal from Jack Spyder, will you?" Van heard, the voice suddenly angry.

Uh-oh, Van thought. *I'm sunk.* His mind raced. *If it means getting out of this jam, then fine, I'll admit to it all. I'll even turn in Todd. It just hurts so much.*

"Okay, I admit…" he began, but was interrupted again.

"Shut up!" the voice commanded, the last words Van would hear. In the next moment, a plastic bag was brought down over Van's head. There was a ripping sound, and tape started winding around Van's neck, securing the bag over his head.

Van panicked and inhaled sharply, preparing to scream. But the thin film clung to his nostrils. He choked instantly, and coughed it back out. But the air was quickly becoming very stale inside. Instinctively, he tried to reach for his face to rip the bag away, but his arms were still wedged in the

dumbwaiter. The reflex caused him to bang his forehead against the wall in front of him, dazing him. Spikes of pain shot through his arms to his shoulders.

The pain only served to cut through the fog that was gathering around his mind as he suffocated. It made him more aware of what was happening — and what was about to happen. The knowledge nearly drove him crazy, and in frustration, he began to purposely bang his head against the wall.

If only I knew Morse code, he thought. *Then I could bang out SOS. I know it's simple, I just… can't… remember it… right now. But even if I did know it, would anyone else* know *that it was Morse code? Or that it was SOS? And if even they did know, by the time they got here, I'd probably have brain damage just from pounding it out. Todd… would say… I already have… brain damage.*

The thought made Van chuckle weakly, using the last of his air. His head fell forward and struck the wall one last time.

*** * ***

"It's all right!" Doug shouted. "It's just a robot!"

Laura didn't seem to hear, and continued clawing at the door to escape. At the sight of the lifelike robot, she had screamed hysterically and tried to run. But in her panic, she couldn't seem to open the door. Doug ran to her and wrapped his arms around her.

"It's all right, Laura," he said firmly. She continued to struggle in his arms. Tears flowed down her cheeks.

Rachel looked in astonishment at Laura and then at the robot. It was a frightening sight, but Laura seemed almost unhinged.

"We have to get out of here," Laura cried. Then looking fiercely into Doug's eyes, she whispered hoarsely, "We have to get out of here, right now."

"It's okay," Doug said softly. Then he turned to Rachel. "I'm sorry. We have to go."

"What about Jack?" Rachel demanded. "He may be hurt."

"We have to leave," Laura told her, a wild look in her eyes. "You should leave, too."

"Jack will be all right," Doug said. "He's probably downstairs looking for you. Besides, the ambulance will be here soon enough. Why don't you come with us?"

"I'm not leaving until I find out what's happened to Jack," Rachel said, her voice quivering. Something had happened — and her friends were abandoning her. And abandoning Jack as well.

"Okay," Doug told her. Clearly, he knew what Rachel was thinking. But his priority had to be getting Laura out of here. "But will you please walk us out to the car? I won't feel right just leaving you here, in front of *this."* He nodded his head toward the Freddy Krueger robot.

"Okay. But let's hurry," she told them as they started back. "I want to help the paramedics find Jack."

Down at the car, Laura pleaded one last time for Rachel to leave with them.

"Something's wrong in there, Rachel. I can feel it. I've felt it before."

Doug also tried to persuade Rachel. "Look, even the security guys have left. You shouldn't be here alone."

Rachel looked around. Indeed, the lawn, which had served as the parking lot, was empty, save for Rachel's car and two others.

Rachel shook her head. "I know you have to go," she told them. "But I have to stay. *Somebody's* here." She pointed to the third floor of the mansion where a yellow glow flickered through a window. For a moment, the light was eclipsed by a silhouette. Someone was looking out at them.

Then that someone was gone, and moments later, the light went out.

"There, see?" Rachel said. "That might be Jack. I'd better go in and see."

"Call us later and tell us how it all shook out," Doug said reluctantly. He opened the passenger door, and Laura got in. "Apologize to Jack for us, would you?" Doug seemed truly distressed at their flight.

"You got it," Rachel assured him.

Doug closed the door and walked around to the other side of the car. As he got in and started the engine, Laura rolled down her window.

"Be careful, okay?" she asked, her eyes haunted.

Before Rachel could reply, Doug drove off. She watched the headlights disappear, then turned back to the mansion, holding the flashlight Doug had given her. Walking toward the house, she thought of Jack and panicked. What if the house should somehow disappear, taking Jack with it? Rachel

broke into a run. She reached the front door, and took one step into the house.

It was as quiet as a grave.

Now every instinct she had told her to turn, to get in her car, and catch up with Doug and Laura.

Because she suddenly became quite certain that she was the only human being left alive in the entire place.

"No!" she said out loud to give herself courage. *Jack's in there,* she thought, taking another step forward.

But something *was* wrong. Laura had been right. Not out at the car, but upstairs. She had smelled something, but in the excitement, they had all forgotten about it. Now the odor was stronger. The heavy scent of rotten eggs assaulted Rachel's nostrils. Moving deeper into the house, it only got worse, and she started to choke.

Now it became imperative that she find Jack.

Because the mansion was filling with gas.

Chapter 10

Now this *is a* real *drag,* Vanessa thought.

Waiting patiently for something to happen had never been her strong suit. She was used to making things happen, fast. But according to Ron's plan for the evening, there was nothing for her to do, except light the candle Ron had placed in her room and keep it burning until his evening's «chores» were completed.

To his credit, Ron had executed his plan flawlessly. Having tipped off the guards that the blackout was a planned event — as a way of keeping the party from running too late, he had told them — the mansion had emptied out quickly. The last three stragglers were now getting into their car. One of them, she noticed from her third-story window, was that Rachel girl, Jack's old flame.

"Sorry, honey," Vanessa purred at the window. "Your little baby *bathtub* buddy is going bye-bye *real* soon."

Almost as if the girl could hear her, Rachel turned and looked right up at the window at Vanessa. Vanessa stepped back, a little unnerved by the knowledge that she had been caught. But of *course* Rachel hadn't heard her. That was impossible. In the dark, the other girl probably hadn't even see her.

Still, it was a creepy little scene.

Vanessa sat back on her bed now, keeping the candle burning, because that was all she could do. Her heart gave a little flutter of delight when she heard a car drive off. No doubt Rachel was finally gone, and now they were alone. Just her, Ron, and Jack.

But where exactly were they? she wondered. Ron had said he'd come up to her room as soon as everyone was gone, so they could go over their plans.

I hope he hurries, Vanessa thought. All this time alone, sitting with a candle in the dark — when you're used to being out beneath the neon of Hollywood — was boring. And more than a little scary.

Not long ago, she had heard someone shouting for help. At first, she'd thought it must be some dim-witted party guest frightened by Jack's playrooms. But the sound had come from another direction. Then came

several solid thumps, like someone banging a rock against a wall. That too had stopped.

It reminded Vanessa that the mansion was actually supposed to be haunted.

That was nonsense, she told herself.

Nonetheless, she wanted Ron to hurry. Her willingness to keep the candle burning for him was waning. Unfortunately, sleep wasn't an option at the moment, either. To her jet-lagged system, it was still only early evening in Los Angeles.

So she had no choice, *but* to keep the candle…

The candle.

Its light had been growing brighter. Not neon-bright, of course, but Vanessa could see more details in her room. And behind the scent of the candle — thoughtful Ron had brought her a cinnamon votive — was another, less pleasant odor.

Rotten eggs.

Without thinking, Vanessa leaped at the candle and brought her flattened palm down on the flame, snuffing it.

Yelping in pain, she brought her burned hand to her mouth. Cursing herself, she sucked on her palm. Wax broke off into Vanessa's mouth and she spit it out. The air was now scented with a potpourri of cinnamon, smoke, rotten eggs, and burned flesh.

She studied the candle to make sure the wick was out completely. If not for the scent of the candle, she would have recognized the smell of leaking gas sooner. And if she hadn't noticed… It had been a stroke of providence that the candle had started burning brighter — as it burned off the gas that was seeping into the air. There was no staying put any longer now. She had to find Ron — and Jack, she loathed to admit, for it was too soon to dispose of him. She had to get all of them out of the mansion.

Before Vanessa reached her door, a light appeared underneath it.

"Ron?" she called and threw open the door. No one was there. Stepping out, she saw the light disappearing around a corner. "Jack?" she called out more uncertainly. Whoever had the flashlight was moving away. She ran toward it. Rounding the corner, she saw it in the distance, but could not see who was holding it.

"Who's there?" Vanessa called out. The flashlight stopped and turned, shining toward her. Vanessa couldn't even make out a figure.

"There's a gas leak," she yelled, not caring who it was. "It's happened before in this house. We have to get out of here. She started forward again. To Vanessa's relief, the light remained in one place. But just as she got close enough to almost catch a glimpse of who she was shouting at, the figure turned and ran off.

"Hey come *back*, you *moron*!" she yelled. She was never in the mood for games, but this was the worst.

Rounding yet another corner, Vanessa saw the light down the hall. This time, it was shining on the floor, out of a doorway ahead.

"Don't run *off*, who*ever* you are," Vanessa called out. "I'm trying to be *nice* to you." Vanessa stopped running and approached the light carefully. "Can't you *smell* it?" She tried to sound calm, conversational, but she suddenly realized how scared she was.

The jury *has reached a verdict, your honor. They say I am* scared *out of my* wits.

Vanessa reached the doorway, beyond which was not a room but a small landing. And this time, the flashlight did not move. Because this time, no one was holding it. It lay on the top step of what appeared to be a back staircase. Frustrated by the disappearance of the mystery person, Vanessa picked up the flashlight.

"Well, looks like I'm on my own," she said aloud. "I'm going to save *myself."*

Pointing the flashlight down the stairs, she thought this seemed to be as good a way to get out as any. *Have to go down before I can get out, anyway,* she concluded. *And Ron wasn't kidding when he said that the place filled up with gas quickly. I wonder what moron accidentally turned it on.*

Vanessa started down the stairs. On the first step, her foot slipped on the carpeting that covered the stairs, and she had to grab the railing to keep herself from falling. As a result, the flashlight dropped out of her hand and bounced down the stairs. The bulb broke, and the stairway became pitch-black. Vanessa stood still, waiting for her eyes to adjust.

That's when she heard the voice.

"Someone's got a *see*-cret" came a sinister singsong from the landing behind Vanessa. She turned, but could not see who was there.

"What are you talking about?" she asked, her voice heavy with annoyance. But she couldn't disguise the fear that was now consuming her. She knew *exactly* what the voice was referring to.

"You shouldn't try to pull the rug out from under someone's life," the voice whispered sinisterly. "You never know when someone might just do it to you, first."

"What do you want from me?" Vanessa demanded. She was rooted in place, afraid to move. There was murder in that voice.

"All I want is this," hissed the voice. "When we meet again, you'll have to tell me how it felt."

Vanessa was confused. "What are — *aaaaaaahhh*!" The floor moved beneath her feet suddenly, and Vanessa was thrown into the air. This time, her hand never even got close to the railing. In the eternal moment before Vanessa's head struck the first wooden step, she realized what had happened. The steps weren't carpeted at all, but someone — the possessor of that sinister voice — had draped a rug over the top steps…

And pulled the rug out from under Vanessa Chimera.

Then the infinite moment ended, and Vanessa's head struck the fifth step from the bottom. A light brighter than all the neon in Hollywood blazed for an instant.

Then it winked out, as did her life.

Rachel stopped and listened. The mansion now seemed alive with sounds. Thumps, things sliding across floors, all of it coming from above.

All coming from the Haunted Mansion.

Despite the threat of being overwhelmed by gas, she headed toward the source of the sounds. For all she knew, it was Jack, wandering around. With a blow on the head, and lungs filled with gas, he might not even know who or where he was.

But where was everyone else? Rachel wondered. She had fully expected to run into Vanessa or Ron or the other guests whose cars were still outside. But no one had appeared. No one had answered her calls. What if whoever was left had succumbed to the gas?

Dread thicker than the gas permeating the mansion began to envelope her. *If I'm the only one conscious,* she thought, *how can I possibly save all the others?*

You can't, answered a voice inside of her. *There's only one person you can save, guaranteed, and that's yourself. And that's if you get out of the house now.*

"I'm not leaving without trying to find Jack," she said out loud. "Besides, somebody's upstairs, moving around. I can hear it now."

Rachel climbed the stairs that lead to the Haunted Mansion rooms. Gingerly, she pushed open the first door, shining the flashlight ahead of her.

"Jack?" she called out, poking her head in. "Is anyone in here?" There was no answer. She entered the room.

With the flashlight, she checked the platform where the guillotine was set up. No one was there, except the fake executioner and the fake, headless victim.

Only the victim wasn't the same one she had seen earlier. This one was female — she noted the painted fingernails — and by the looks of it, someone had gone overboard with the blood effects. Gallons appeared to have poured from that stump. It almost made Rachel sick, but she willed her stomach to stop flopping about and turned away.

As she headed for the next room, something like wet hair brushed against her face. Recoiling, she wiped the liquid off her cheek and shined the flashlight to her side. There stood the second executioner, holding out a decapitated head as before.

Only this too had changed. And somehow, it looked familiar. Rachel shined the flashlight right into the face, it's mouth open, silently screaming, the sightless eyes staring forward.

This time, Rachel did gag as she shined the flashlight at the body near the guillotine and then back into the face. They belonged together, a matched set. The head and the body had once been known to Rachel collectively as Vanessa Chimera.

*** * ***

Rachel screamed — and the world started to spin around her. The combination of shock and a lack of oxygen due to the gas leak nearly did her in. But she forced herself to stumble into the next room. There, she flopped down on the platform.

It was getting hard to breathe. But she hadn't found Jack yet. *My God, Vanessa!* she thought. Who could have done that? And why? Where were those ambulances?

I'm delirious, Rachel realized. *But I have to find Jack.* Forcing herself to her feet, she swept the room with the flashlight, as she had before. The

beam caught the zombies, frozen in their feeding frenzy. It also illuminated their unfortunate victim.

Todd Winkle.

I have to get out of here, Rachel thought, stifling another scream. She fought to keep her breathing shallow. Another outburst and she'd collapse. But she couldn't go back. She couldn't bear seeing Vanessa's savagely decapitated head. So she kept moving forward.

Now she was just trying to escape. But in her trembling hands, the flashlight no longer shined simply straight ahead. Instead, the beam scoured the room as if of its own accord. Out of the corner of her eye, Rachel glimpsed something amiss near Dracula's crypt. She knew she shouldn't look, but something inside compelled her.

She thought she heard a tiny "I told you so" float from the depths of her mind.

Crumpled against the crypt was the body of Van McBride. Blood ran out of two holes in his neck. More blood ran down from a bruise on his forehead. His tongue, black and swollen, protruded from his mouth. Dark bruises ringed his forearms like tattoos.

Tearing her gaze away, she reached for the door to the next room. But what would she find there? she asked herself. Another body? *Jack's* body? She had to know. To give up now would be like swimming halfway across the English Channel and turning back. Her own laughter was tinged with insanity. Somehow, she found herself enjoying this real-life house of horrors.

Maybe I'll find the next room empty, she thought. *Maybe I'll be the next person to permanently inhabit this gruesome menagerie.*

"Let's do it!" she shouted and burst into the next room.

Her flashlight found Elvis immediately. And he was smiling broadly and wetly. Only, it wasn't the Elvis robot, and he wasn't smiling. Ron Marchant sat in the King's place, his «smile» the grotesque curve of a razor cut circumscribing his throat. The blood dripping onto his feet gave him one purple suede shoe.

"I guess Elvis has left the building," she commented drunkenly.

Her attention was riveted on the horrible scene — until a clicking sound to her right distracted her. Turning, she shined the flashlight.

Against the far door, alive, sat Jack. At her head, he pointed a rifle.

Chapter 11

At the sight of Jack — and the gun barrel — Rachel's mind immediately became sharp.

"Jack!" she yelled, but made no move toward him. "It's me, Rachel!"

A large, purple bruise decorated Jack's forehead. Looking confused, he kept holding the gun up. The barrel weaved slightly. Rachel realized that he was probably even groggier than she was.

She edged toward him. "It's Rachel, Jack. There's a gas leak. We have to leave."

He lowered the barrel and stared at her, as if still unsure of her identity. He started to cry. Wrapping her arms around him, Rachel carefully pushed the gun away from him.

"He was my last, best friend," Jack sobbed.

Rachel looked back up at Ron. "I'm sorry, John," she said, soothingly. "Do you know what happened? There are… others." While she spoke, Rachel tried to help him to his feet.

"Vanessa… Todd Winkle… Van McBride…" Stumbling to his feet, Jack spoke their names as if in eulogy. "And Ron." He started to break down again, then stopped abruptly. Wide-eyed, he turned to Rachel as if about to tell her an important secret.

"I think I might have done it," he confided to her seriously. "I'm really not that well, y'know, in the head. I was institutionalized for a while. Ron knew that. That's why he was such a big help to me."

"You didn't kill anyone," Rachel told him as she directed him back the way she had come. They would both have to keep from looking at any of the bodies.

"I remember falling," Jack babbled as they staggered through the room. "But when I woke up, I was upstairs in a closed section of the mansion. And when I came to the ballroom, everyone was gone."

"The power went out," Rachel reminded him. They had passed Van's body without looking and were now entering the zombie room. "Now there's a gas leak."

"Did I do all this?" he asked, gesturing to where Todd's body lay, a feast for zombies. "I found the gun here." He suddenly became frantic. "I

almost killed you with it."

"It's okay," Rachel told him. "You didn't know who I was."

"But for the last few hours, I didn't even know who *I* was. So maybe…" Jack's voice trailed off as they entered the executioner room. Avoiding Vanessa's head would be difficult.

"Keep looking at the floor," she warned Jack. "And keep moving… And you didn't kill anyone," she added. But now, she wasn't sure. Maybe Jack was a lot less stable than he had let on earlier. He didn't seem dangerous now, but…

Rachel mentally slapped herself. It was the gas. The gas was making Jack confess to crimes he had not committed, and it was making her paranoid.

Despite her efforts, her mind looped back. Was the gas deluding Jack — or making him tell the truth?

All internal discussion stopped when the mummy entered the room, brandishing an axe.

"He's mine," the mummy called out, and attacked.

The axe split the air between Jack and Rachel. It would have divested them of the arms they had linked together, but at the last minute, Rachel pushed Jack away from her. He flew to one side, she fell the opposite way. The axe whooshed through the space they had occupied only moments before.

By the way the mummy overcompensated on the follow-through, Rachel could tell that it too wasn't immune to the effects of the gas. The fallen flashlight cast an eerie twilight throughout the room. Rachel watched the mummy recover its balance, then pull to its full height and stare down at Jack. Jack looked up, stunned, helpless. The mummy's right hand gripped the axe tightly. Jack was a goner — unless she acted fast.

"Leave him alone!" Rachel shouted. Big mistake. The mummy whirled around.

"Tonight's a dream come true," said the mummy. It was purposely distorting its speaking voice so Rachel could not tell if it was male or female. Still, the voice sounded familiar. Savoring the terror it was causing, the mummy approached Rachel, who shrank back behind the executioner. The mummy quickly swept Vanessa's head aside. "You don't think I'm going to let you ruin it for me, do you?"

Rachel was trying to push the robot at the mummy, but the thing wouldn't budge. Her only hope was that the space was too cramped for the mummy to have a good shot with the axe.

"I've been dreaming and planning… planning and dreaming," the mummy continued. "*He* was even helping me, until *he* betrayed me. Even then, my dreams and plans were coming true."

"Who was trying to help you?" Rachel asked. She needed to buy time.

"I have said my piece," the mummy announced demurely, not taking the bait. Its speech pattern was maddeningly familiar. The mummy raised the axe. Despite Rachel's efforts, she was still an easy target.

Suddenly, there came a dull, wet thump, and the mummy's head lunged forward. Without thinking, Rachel kicked out, hoping to knock the axe from the mummy's hand, but instead, she kicked the mummy in the stomach. As the mummy flew backward, the axe came down, barely missing Rachel's leg. Jack grabbed the mummy by the wrist then, and threw the costumed murderer toward the entrance.

"Come on," said a suddenly revitalized Jack, grabbing Rachel's hand and yanking her out from behind the executioner.

"You… would hurt… me?" the mummy yelled as it stood, its voice trembling with rage. One hand still held the axe. The other rubbed the back of its head where Jack had struck.

Without answering the mummy, Jack dragged Rachel through the door, back into the Haunted Mansion.

"What did you hit him with?" Rachel asked.

"You don't want to know," Jack told her gravely.

Rachel knew the answer instantly. And in fact, had known the answer before she asked the question.

Because as they left, she had noticed that Vanessa's head was missing from the executioner's grasp.

Before they reached the other side of the zombie room, the first door flew open, and the mummy appeared.

"If I can't have you, no one will," it shouted in rage — and hurled the axe at them.

Jack pushed Rachel into the next room and dove in himself, just as the axe struck the door. Its blade cut through the door, nearly splitting it in two.

"Keep going!" Jack shouted at Rachel, who was transfixed by the blade of the axe that had nearly killed them twice. "We have to get the gun."

This time, the mummy was not as quick to follow them, and they made it safely to the Elvis room.

"Look for the gun," Jack told her. "But be careful. I had the hammer cocked, and it's loaded."

At first, they searched futilely in the dark. But then Rachel turned on her emergency lights, which gave them just enough light to find the rifle. It was right where Rachel had left it, near the far door. She handed the rifle gingerly to Jack, who checked the hammer and pointed it toward the door through which they had just come.

"That sucker takes one step into this room, he's *really* gonna need those bandages."

Rachel looked at Jack, astonished. Minutes ago, he had been simpering. Now he possessed all his faculties and more than a little bit of rage. It looked like the adrenaline rush — which she had felt when he had pointed the gun at her — had worked its wonders on him, too.

The door leading to the vampire room began to swing open.

"One more step and I'm giving you central air," Jack warned, sighting down the barrel of the rifle.

The mummy just stood in the doorway, holding the axe. It took a step forward.

"I'm warning you," Jack said, his finger trembling on the trigger.

The mummy took another step forward.

"That's it," Jack said, and began to squeeze the trigger.

"Wait!" Rachel screamed, before he could pull off a shot. The urgency in her voice froze even the mummy. "The gas. It just occurred to me. If you fire, you'll ignite the gas. *We might blow up!"*

Jack looked at Rachel then down at the gun. She was right, he realized. The flash from the gunpowder would create an inferno around them. They had trumped themselves.

The mummy knew it and started forward.

"And something else occurred to me," Rachel said in the same, urgent tone. She pointed at the mummy.

"It's you, Maria, under that mask. Isn't it?"

The mummy staggered back as if struck. Then, pulling itself up to full height, it reached up a hand and yanked off the mummy mask.

Maria's dark hair spilled out.

"Knowing the truth won't save you," she told them defiantly.

Rachel almost laughed. "That's how I knew," she told them. "The melodramatic lines, especially 'If I can't have him, no one will. No offense, Maria, but your delivery is a little… arch."

The rage in Maria's eyes could have lit up the room. She held up the axe. "Mock me at your own peril."

"I rest my case," Rachel said, aware that she was taking an enormous chance. "Look, you're gonna kill us both, like everyone else, so…"

"Not both," Maria interrupted. "Not necessarily."

"Because I'm yours, right?" Jack ventured to ask.

"And I am yours," Maria responded. "I've been a fan since *Nutt House* started. And I knew that one day I would be in it. You were my inspiration to study acting." Maria frowned. "But they cancelled *Nutt House*, and took you away from me for a while. Then the dreams began. They told me you were returning. And that you were returning for me. The dreams even told me about Ron, who was going to introduce us."

"So, you dreamed all this?" Jack asked dubiously.

"Yes, and it all came true. You returned. I spoke to Ron, who claimed to have had the same dreams. So he said he would help. But there were so many betrayers, ones who would hurt you. *They* needed to be… dealt with. For you, for *us*, I struck out at them."

Jack was horrified. "You killed these people for *me*?"

Maria's smile was one of pride in a job well done. "They were all going to hurt you."

"But Ron," Rachel said. "Ron was Jack's friend."

Maria's smile turned into a snarl almost instantly. "He was the biggest betrayer of all. He would have taken Jack away from me for good." The smile returned. "Now, nothing stands in our way. You'll take me back to Hollywood, under your tutelage, and we'll be one of the great Hollywood teams. Tracy and Hepburn, Astaire and Rogers, Burton and Taylor." Her eyes glittered with possibility.

"Spyder and Cicotti?" Jack wondered aloud. "Bye," he said quickly, and without warning, grabbed Rachel by the hand and started running. They went through the door and Jack immediately leapt up on the platform.

Behind them, Maria screamed with rage.

"She's nuts!" Jack shouted to Rachel. "Here, help me push this robot down. Maybe we can block the door." But as soon as he touched the Freddy Krueger robot, something fell from it and hit the floor like a bag of sand.

"It's RePete!" Rachel cried, backing away. From the looks of things, he had been impaled by the robot's upraised claw.

The door from the Elvis room opened about four inches, then stopped against RePete's body which had fallen in front of it. The axe waved wildly through the crack in the door. Then it was replaced by Maria's face pressed against the opening.

"I'm coming for both of you now. Laugh at me, will you? Not while I have the means to cut you down to size." To emphasize her statement, she showed off the axe once more. Then, with a grunt, she threw her weight into the door, attempting to shoulder it open. RePete's body slid a few more inches, but she could still not enter.

"C'mon, Rachel," Jack yelled. "Back here."

Rachel turned toward his voice, just as Maria thumped against the door again. One more try and she would gain entry. Reaching out, Rachel allowed Jack to pull her toward the back of the platform, where a darker area in the wall indicated a passageway.

They were about to duck into it when Maria screamed.

Jack and Rachel turned just in time to see the axe fall from Maria's hand onto the floor. Her body thumped against the door again, but this time, it was as if another force had thrown her.

An incredibly strong force.

The door swung open, pushing RePete's body aside as if it were a feather pillow. Maria careened off the opening door and landed to the side of the doorway. Then a large figure strode casually through.

Jack recovered from his shock more quickly than Rachel. "Ron!" he cried at the bloody half-Elvis who had just entered. "I thought you were dead, man."

"Dead? Me?" Ron asked, smiling brightly — and lethally, Rachel thought. Jack was struggling to pull free of her, but she held his hand tightly, knowing that if she let go, he would die. "Actually, dude," Ron chuckled. "I *am* dead."

The words hit Jack like buckshot.

"Stop kidding around," Jack said nervously. "This evening is too freaky for you to joke like that."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Ron said, as if he had been extremely rude. He looked down at himself. "I still have my costume on, don't I?" Subtly, Ron's voice was changing. It was becoming deeper, more guttural. "Let me take off this

mask. It's getting hard to breathe in it anyway." His voice was now totally changed. It had become monstrous.

In the dim, available light, Jack and Rachel watched aghast as Ron brought a hand up to the slash in his throat.

"Ron…" Jack started but fell silent when his friend ignored him completely, digging his fingers into the wound across his throat. A wet, tearing sound followed, as Ron peeled his face off, much like Jack had done earlier with his latex Phantom of the Opera makeup.

Only this was not makeup.

Ron tore off his own face.

Beneath it resided the face of a monster. Wet with blood, surrounded by a tattered frame of flesh, a burned, scarred creature leered out at them.

"Trick or treat!" growled Freddy Krueger.

Chapter 12

This time, it was Rachel who acted without warning. With the hand that had so desperately been holding onto Jack, she pulled him into the passageway behind the exhibit. She caught a glimpse of Krueger's face as they fled. He watched them with devilish amusement.

"Where does this go?" she barked at Jack, who seemed stunned.

Back in the room, Krueger started laughing. The sound filled the passageway, surrounded them, threatening to drive them mad.

"Around the outside of the rooms, back to the top of the ballroom staircase," he finally answered, and took the lead. "What was that?" he asked desperately. "Are we hallucinating? Has the gas gotten to us?"

"I don't think so," Rachel told him. What they had seen was beyond comprehension, but she did not doubt its reality. "We have to get into a car and drive out of here. You still have the rifle?"

"Yeah. For whatever good it will do us against… *that."*

"Maybe," Rachel responded. "But if we can get outside… *when* we get outside," she corrected herself. "We may get a chance. You any good?"

"Actually, yeah. Went to firing ranges all the time in LA."

"Maybe the rifle won't be effective against Krueger, but it's better than nothing." What was Freddy Krueger? And could he be killed? Somehow, Rachel didn't think so. But there must be a way for them to escape, or by now, no one in Springwood would be left alive. No teens, at least.

"Here we go," Jack said, pointing out the exit. They emerged on the landing opposite the entrance to the Haunted Mansion. Taking the stairs two at a time, they ran down into the ballroom. If they reached the exit, they were home free.

But Freddy Krueger appeared at the ballroom entrance. He had carved off the remainder of Ron's skin, but ribbons of flesh still clung to the tattered, striped sweater he wore. Leaning against the doorway, as if without a care in the world, Freddy addressed the gleaming blades of the claw at the end of one hand.

"What? No last dance? I was really looking forward to… cutting the rug." With a metallic clicking, Freddy scissored the blades together several times in rapid succession.

Jack and Rachel froze, trying to decide what to do next. Luckily, Freddy didn't seem like he was in any hurry to dispose of them, though he did turn and face them.

"Homecoming turn into a bit of a nightmare?" he asked Jack. Turning to Rachel, he asked, "Your reunion with your dreamy old boyfriend not so dreamy?"

He started to walk slowly toward them, his claw dropped to his side. They backed up, each eyeing possible exits. Freddy saw them and was amused.

"Maybe you can get out that way," he teased, pointing with the claw. "Or maybe that way." Each time he reached out, they jumped, further amusing Freddy.

"Maria had been dreaming about meeting the famous Jack Spyder since she first laid eyes on you. And with my help, she managed to keep her obsession hidden for quite some time. So when things didn't work out the way they had in her dreams, can you blame her for getting a little… out of sorts?"

"You manipulated her?" Rachel asked.

Freddy snarled. "Don't get the idea you're buying time, little girl. Any time you have left I'm *giving* to you." He gave her a withering stare, then smiled solicitously — and grotesquely. "I manipulated all of you. She was the easiest, because she was off-balance. Then there was your 'friend' Ron, who had planned such a nice little coup." At Jack's look of disbelief, Freddy laughed. "Oh, he was no more your friend than a black widow, my little Spyder. I'm sure he'll be happy to tell you all about his scheming when you join him in my boiler room. Because that's where you're going. Straight to *hell*!" With that, he lunged forward, swiping at them with his blades. They jumped back, but did not run.

"Just seeing if you were on your toes," Freddy laughed. "Ron has been mine since late this past summer. He was sleeping on the job, which is a bad idea around a gas leak. It's the kind of thing that you don't normally wake up from, if you know what I mean." He chuckled sinisterly. "But I must admit, it's been a *gas* to be Ron all this time."

Rachel was stunned. According to what Freddy was saying, he'd been guiding events leading up to this evening's massacre for months. And all the while, he had been inhabiting Ron's body.

"We can't win," she whispered softly to herself.

Freddy, who had driven them into the center of the ballroom, smiled.

"Now that's the spirit."

He held up his gleaming talons.

"Time to give Freddy his treat." His voice was low, seductive, but still horrible. He reached forward, holding his claws point-up underneath her chin.

But Jack had other plans.

Taking advantage of Freddy's distraction, he flipped the rifle so he was holding the muzzle and quickly swung it at Freddy's claw. The butt of the rifle struck Freddy's wrist, nearly shattering as it drove his hand downward. Freddy roared with rage. In another deft move, Jack jabbed the gun forward, nailing Freddy in the stomach. He doubled over, but before Jack could pull the rifle away, Freddy's unclawed hand shot out, grabbing the rifle in the center. His fingers quickly worked their way toward the trigger. The muzzle of the rifle now pointed directly at Jack's chest.

Freddy's gnarled finger squeezed the trigger. Jack braced for impact.

But nothing happened. The safety was on.

At that moment, Rachel overcame her paralysis. With all her might, she drove her foot into Freddy's side. By reflex, his hand dropped away from the rifle and clutched what should have been broken ribs.

But Rachel had no such hope that she had caused that much damage. She only knew that Jack could now pull the rifle free of Freddy.

"Take it!" she yelled.

He immediately yanked the rifle away and the two ran off. They both knew that they had to get out of the house immediately. If Freddy didn't get them, the gas soon would. It was only by sheer force of will that they had survived this long. But their will was fading. It suffered a further blow when they heard Freddy bellow with rage. He spoke no words, but simply roared furiously. If he caught them again, there would be no more facetious smiles, no more grandiose toying.

In that sound, both Rachel and Jack heard the promise of their own painful deaths.

Still, they made it to the front door. And outside, the fresh air seemed to sharpen their minds immediately. Acting quickly, John locked the house from the outside. The steel-lined, hardwood security door would prove at least an obstacle to Freddy in his pursuit. And there was no question he was

pursuing them. A series of crashes — large items being flung aside — marked Freddy's progress through the mansion.

From about a hundred yards across the lawn they heard the sounds of Freddy attempting to break through the door. They turned and faced the mansion.

"If we try to run, we won't make it," Jack said.

Rachel nodded. There seemed to be no real escape. That realization was the downside of their new clarity of mind. Inside, brains clouded by a lack of oxygen, they had found some reason to hope. Now, there was none. Even the sight of her car nearby gave her no hope of escape. They could drive away, but Freddy, now unleashed would follow.

And bring destruction along with him.

Thunderous booms emanated from the front door. Even from a distance, its buckling was obvious. And in the next moment, with a tremendous crack, the door exploded forward. And framed within the doorway was the menacing figure of Freddy Krueger.

Jack dropped to his knees and flicked off the safety of the rifle. He drew a bead and fired. Freddy jerked slightly, but did not fall.

"I hit him," Jack said hopelessly. "Maybe if I hit him in the face." His eyes narrowed in determination and he pulled off another shot. This one fell short, striking the wreckage of the door.

As the bullet careened off the steel reinforcement, sending off a tiny spark, Rachel got an idea.

Jack squeezed off another shot. This one appeared to hit Freddy in the left shoulder, but it only slowed the monster.

"Jack," Rachel said quietly as he took aim again. "I have an idea of how to stop Freddy, but you may end up losing everything in the process."

He looked at her, trying to read her mind, but failing. In the distance, Freddy marched forward inexorably.

"Will it get me killed?" he asked matter-of-factly.

"I don't think so."

He considered her uncertainty, then fired at Freddy again. This time, he seemed to hit the monster squarely in the chest, driving him back several feet. He was still within thirty feet of the front door.

"Will it get *you* killed," he asked much more seriously.

"I hope not," Rachel replied.

"Then do it," Jack decided quickly. "I'm not going to be able to hold him off much longer."

* * *

"What's the plan?" Jack asked, not taking his eye off Freddy. His slow, deliberate movements reminded Jack of Godzilla wading through Tokyo. The gun he held amounted to a pea shooter against this monster.

The sound of a car engine revving to life reminded him that Rachel had never given him an answer. The sound of tires spinning in dirt made him turn.

In her car, Rachel took off like a shot, steering straight for Freddy.

Damn! Jack thought. *She's gonna try and run him down. That'll kill her for sure.* There was only one thing to do. Rapid-firing, he rained bullets on Freddy. If he scored enough hits, the monster might be momentarily driven back into the mansion. And if so, maybe Rachel would abandon her suicide mission. After the fourth rapid shot, his part of the plan seemed to be working. Freddy was forced almost back into the doorway.

But Rachel did not slow down.

Freddy saw the oncoming car, and spread his arms wide, almost welcoming it.

That's when Rachel dove out of the car. As it sped on a collision course toward Krueger, she rolled across the grass on a divergent path.

First, the underside of the car raked against the steel of the door. Then the entire vehicle leapt into the air, carrying with it a shower of sparks.

Freddy's hands flew up in an effort to protect himself, rather than welcoming the oncoming juggernaut. The front bumper caught him squarely in the chest and the last Jack saw of Freddy Krueger was the monster being thrown backwards through the doorway of the mansion.

That was also the last Jack saw of his mansion.

The sparks that flew along with the car bounced into the entrance even as the car plowed into it. Later, he would never be able to say whether it was the sparks alone or if the impact ruptured the car's gas tank. Whatever the cause, the gas inside the mansion ignited.

The first explosion knocked Jack backwards about twenty feet. The second, third, and fourth explosions proceeded to level the mansion. Jack

was driven farther and farther back, finally taking refuge behind one of the remaining cars on his lawn. One explosion rocked the vehicle so violently, Jack thought it would topple over onto him.

Then the rain of fiery debris began. At first, he crawled under the car to avoid being struck.

Then he remembered that Rachel was out there, somewhere. Unprotected.

Running toward the column of flames and smoke that had only minutes before been his childhood home, Jack began searching for Rachel. The heat was searing, nearly driving him back. But he forced himself onward toward where he had last seen her.

She had been impossibly close to the house. Jack feared the worst. Flaming wreckage seemed to cover the entire yard. In the distance, he could see a fire already beginning in the forest. His face felt sunburned.

He almost walked past Rachel. In her black bodysuit, she was nearly impossible to spot. Only the lighter skin of her hands alerted Jack to her location. He found her farther from the house than he had expected. Then he realized that the force of the blast must have flung her away as it had him.

She was lying face-down, unconscious but breathing. Turning her over carefully, he brushed the hair from her face. Cradling her for several minutes, he strained to listen for sirens. An explosion that big would surely be noticed in town. And the glowing column of smoke would be impossible to miss.

Jack hoped Rachel would be all right until the authorities arrived.

*** * ***

Rachel dreamed of camping. She sat on a log in front of a tremendous bonfire. With her were Maria and RePete. Across the fire on another log sat Vanessa and Ron. Beside them sat Todd and Van. They were all roasting marshmallows. Only the fire was much too hot. The marshmallows were burning, dropping like molten nuggets into the flames. Then their clothing started to catch on fire. They beat at the flames, trying to extinguish them, but to no avail. Vanessa and Ron became human torches, as did the rest of the gathering.

All except Rachel. Rachel could feel the heat, but was otherwise unaffected by it. Around her, the others were dancing grotesque jigs as they were consumed. Finally, one by one, Maria, RePete, Todd, Van, Vanessa, and Ron all cast themselves into the infernal bonfire, which reached to the sky.

For a moment, Rachel was alone.

Then suddenly, Freddy Krueger sat beside her. Each talon had impaled a marshmallow sandwiched between two graham crackers and a square of milk chocolate.

"You can't be here," Rachel insisted. "I figured it out when I saw the spark. That mansion was filled with enough gas to blow you back to where you came from."

Freddy laughed, then thrust his entire hand into the fire.

"You haven't beaten me," he snarled quietly. "Don't kid yourself." Withdrawing his hand from the fire, he brandished the razors at her. They glowed white-hot. Waving them under her nose, she could smell the toasted graham cracker mingling with the scent of chocolate and marshmallow.

"Freddy will always be back for s'mores!"

Then he started laughing, first as a low rumble, then building to a crescendo of madness.

Her eyes snapped open.

Jack was hovering over her. His lips moved, but he made no sound. In fact, she could hear nothing. Jack seemed to be saying "You did it" over and over.

Rachel turned her head slightly. White-hot pain shot up her spine. But she saw the mansion… or what was left of it. The building had exploded as she had planned, and now resembled the bonfire of her dream.

Or had it been simply another delusion?

But several things immediately became more clear. Both she and Jack had survived the blast. The explosion had made her deaf. And, according to the words forming on Jack's lips, she had done it.

Within the week, Rachel's hearing returned, although she would have to learn to live with a head full of ringing noises. And although she had suffered no other major injuries (Jack had come through almost entirely unscathed), her body remained bruised for a long time afterwards.

But had she done it? Had she disposed of Freddy Krueger?

The memory of her dream returned often. He said he'd be back "for s'mores." And he wasn't talking about chocolate-marshmallow-graham-cracker sandwiches, she was sure of that.

Freddy Krueger would be back.

For more.

Epilogue

That was quite the housewarming Rachel gave Jack, eh?

Even though I had to cut my Halloween rounds short, I still managed to fill my bag with plenty of «treats.» The good news is that I can eat them all at once, and I won't get a stomach ache! Heh heh heh…

Ron, Vanessa, RePete, Maria, Todd, and Van — I've collected all their sweet souls. But down here in the boiler room, you might not recognize them right off. You see, they've removed their human disguises. Each one now appears in his or her true form.

Ron, for example, has a place of his own — wallowing in the muddy water of the terrarium, the blood-sucking leech he has always been. His parasitic soul mate, Vanessa, buzzes around the terrarium as a hungry mosquito. The hapless duo of Todd and Van scavenge as cockroaches, where filth and garbage are now their riches. Also joining them is the bitter RePete, who has shed his human form to become a fly on the wall of the terrarium. Nothing that happens within the terrarium escapes his notice. But, to his frustration, he has no one to tell.

You might think that, compared to some others who have joined me in the boiler room, this group has it pretty easy. What could be less pressured than simply being yourself throughout eternity?

The terrarium isn't exactly a stress-free environment, though. Outside it sits a large, hungry crow. It doesn't see a terrarium. It's sees a smorgasbord. *Heh heh heh… So there it sits, pecking constantly, eyeing the morsels contained within — especially the juicy leech. The denizens of the terrarium will spend eternity in fear, just because some crow — Maria, of course — likes them just the way they are.*

Quoth the raven, 'Evermore! Heh heh heh…

So ends this chilling tale of terror. And in the spirit of the holiday, I wish a scary Halloween to all.

And to all, a good fright!

*** * ***

Hello again. It's me. Your host, Freddy Krueger. Surprised? You thought that maybe the nightmare was over. Well, well. Guess again, my young friend. You see, the terror has only just begun. But I see that you don't believe me. You need proof?

Very well. Just turn the page for a peek of the horror that awaits you…